

Intro to Digital Media & Culture



Image: Emma Stone in *Bugonia* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2025)

🔗 IN 206 Introduction to Digital Media & Culture

Dr. Martin Roberts

Emerson College

Spring 2025

Mon + Wed 12-1:45 p.m. | Walker 633

Office hrs: Thurs 4:00-5:00 p.m.

Office: Ansin 916D

PDF syllabus

YouTube playlist



Course Description

This course considers the nature and contemporary forms of digital culture. Broadly speaking, this can be defined as the diverse range of symbolic practices through which communities affirm and maintain their cultural identities using digital media devices and interfaces in a globally networked society. While these practices are structured by deeply unequal power relations, are contradictory, and often come into conflict with one another, collectively they constitute what may be considered a global digital culture.

A key component of the course is the automation of various forms of creative production, from writing to the visual arts, by natural-language processing computational systems (generically known as “AI”). The course addresses some of the many issues raised by such systems, with a particular focus on questions of aesthetics and the increasingly contested relationship between artists and algorithms. While such systems now demonstrably pass the Turing Test (i.e. pass as human or their products as human-produced), they also compel us to reconsider what we mean by “art,” or “intelligence” itself.

Curriculum objectives

This course is in fulfilment of the Interdisciplinary Perspective portion of the General Education Curriculum. It seeks to challenge students to understand and appraise the role of interdisciplinary knowledge in the arts, culture, and/or human affairs by exploring how at least two disciplinary approaches can be brought together to address a topic in a given area.

Format

This is a critical-thinking course, which 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.

Course-specific learning objectives

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.

Course texts

Excerpted chapters from most of these texts will be made available as PDFs on Canvas. Depending on your interests, you are encouraged to purchase your own copies of at least several of them.

Note on formats: A number of texts listed below and in the bibliography are available as ebooks 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

OA: Open Access

- **Crystal Abidin**, *TikTok and Youth Cultures*. SocietyNow series. Leeds, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2025.
- A: Adam Aleksic, *Algospeak: How Social Media Is Transforming the Future of Language*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- OA: Sarah Ciston, David M. Berry, Anthony C. Hay, Mark C. Marino, Peter Millican, Jeff Shrager, Arthur I. Schwarz and Peggy Weil, *Inventing ELIZA: How The First Chatbot Shaped the Future of AI*. MA: MIT Press, 2026.
- A/E: **Freya India**, *GIRLS®: Generation Z and the Commodification of Everything*. New York: MacMillan Books, 2026.
- John Jordan, *Robots*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Essential Knowledge series.

- Bogna Konior, *The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2026.
- OA: Lev Manovich and Emanuele Arielli, *Artificial Aesthetics: Generative AI, Art and Visual Media*. 2019-24.
- Dominic Pettman, *Ghosting: On Disappearance*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2025.
- Hito Steyerl, *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat*. London: Verso, 2026.
- Sherry Turkle, *Artificial Intimacy: Who We Become When We Talk To Machines*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. Published 29 September. Please purchase after this date.

Journals

- e-flux
- New Models

Substack: Recommended blogs

- GIRLS (Freya India)
- *Internal Exile* (Rob Horning)
- Jenka Gurfinkel
- Gary Marcus

Other Sources

- Data & Society
- Greycoder
- Lev Manovich
- instar books
- Neocities
- TikTok Cultures Research Network

Course requirements

Participation and attendance (10%)

It is important that you come to class prepared with the readings read, digested, in short, ready to actively discuss. This portion of your grade is

based both on active participation in class, and partially on attendance (see below on attendance policy).

You should arm yourself with questions about things that made you curious from them or things that bewildered you. Such discussion is the only way to make sense of many of the concepts that we will be encountering.

Please communicate with me if you expect to miss class. Missing in-class activities (see below) will be detrimental to your grade, but if you let me know ahead of time you'll be absent, you will not be penalized.

Reflections (30%)

For each class, please bring with you one or two quotations from the readings that you feel provide the "core" of what the author(s) are trying to express. It would also be a good idea to have in mind some current event that has transpired.

Midterm and Final examinations (20% + 20%)

There will be two examinations/evaluations in the course of the semester to synthesize the material from the course.

Research Paper/Project (20%)

Research on an approved topic relevant to the course. Individual or group. Further details will be provided after Spring Break. 1,250-1,500 words.

Schedule

Week 1

W, Sept. 2

Introduction: Subterranean Homesick Aliens

- **Monitor the Situation**
- Joshua Citarella and Caroline Busta, "The Online Marketplace of Ideas (2026)"

- Adrienne Evans, “**Doomscrolling for Hope**” (*European Journal of Cultural Studies* Special issue: Cultural Commons on brainrot, AI slop, and the enshittification of the internet, 1 August 2026)
- ***Doomscroll*** (Joshua Citarella, Substack)

Week 2

M, Sept. 7: NO CLASS: Labor Day

Comfortably Numb: Decadence Without Pleasure

W, Sept. 9

Michèle Mendelssohn and Charlie Tyson, “**Why Does Everything Feel So Joyless? Welcome to the Age of Decadence Without Pleasure**” (*The Guardian*, 26 July 2026)

Week 3

Language

M, Sept 14

Adam Aleksic, *Algospeak*, chs. 1-2:

- “Why Your Kids Are Saying ‘Unalive’” (Introduction)
- “No Because What Happened To Your Attention?” (ch. 3)
- “Wordpilled Slangmaxxing” (ch. 6)

W, Sept. 16: Add/Drop Deadline

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

Moodboard: 1

Week 4

Girlhood: Out of Body Experiences

M, Sept. 21

- Freya India, *GIRLS®* (chs. TBA)

W, Sept. 23

- Alex Quicho, “**Everyone is a Girl Online**” (*WIRED*, 11 September 2023)
- Emma Copley Eisenberg, “**Notes on Frump: A Style for the Rest of Us**” (*heyalma*, 10 August 2017)

Moodboard: 2

Week 5

Platform Cultures

M, Sept. 28

- Crystal Abidin, *TikTok Cultures* (chs. TBA)

W, Sept. 30

- Queline Meadows, “The Rise of Film TikTok”
- BookTok
- **TikTok Cultures Research Network**

Moodboard: 3

Week 6

Paranoid Androids

M, Oct. 5

- John Jordan, “Robots in Popular Culture” (*Robots*, ch. 3)
- Jitka Čejková, **Introduction** to *R.U.R. and the Vision of Artificial Life*
- **Robot100 website**
- Čapek, [*R.U.R.*](pdf/“R.U.R._ Or, Rossum’s Universal Robots - Karel Capek.pdf”)

W, Oct. 7

- **Robbie** (Isaac Asimov, 1940)
- **Robbie** (Wikipedia)
- Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, *Tomorrow's Eve* (1878)

Moodboard: 4

Week 7

M, Oct. 12: No class, Indigenous People's Day

Please Go On: Chatbots

Tu, Oct. 13

- Sarah Ciston et al., *Inventing ELIZA* (chs. TBA)

W, Oct. 14

Moodboard: 5

Week 8

Artificial Friends

M, Oct. 19

- Sherry Turkle, *Artificial Intimacy* (chs. TBA)

W, Oct. 21

Moodboard: 6

Week 9

How To Disappear Completely

M, Oct. 26

- Dominic Pettman, *Ghosting*, chs. TBA

W, Oct. 28

- Greg Narr and Anh Luong, “Bored ghosts in the dating app assemblage: How dating app algorithms couple ghosting behaviors with a mood of boredom” (*The Communication Review*, 5 October)
- Jane Barnette, “Hocus-Pocus: WitchTok Education for Baby Witches” (in Trevor Boffone, *TikTok Cultures in the United States*)

Moodboard: 7

Week 10

Hiding from Predators

M, Nov. 2

- Bogna Konior, *The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet* (chs. TBA)

W, Nov. 4

- Maggie Appleton, “The Dark Forest & The Cozy Web”
- Yancey Strickler, “The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet” “Beyond The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet” (2019)

Moodboard: 8

Week 11

Invisible Images

M, Nov. 09

- Trevor Paglen, “Operational Images” (*e-flux journal*, #59, November 2014)

T, Nov 10

- Trevor Paglen, “Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking At You)” (*The New Inquiry*, 8 December 2016)
- Screening: *Dragonfly Eyes* (Xu Bing, 2017)
- *Dragonfly Eyes* presskit

Moodboard: 9

W, Nov. 11: NO CLASS: Veterans’ Day

Week 12

Blockchain Media

M, Nov. 16

- Xiaowei Wang, "Behind China's 'pork miracle: how technology is transforming rural hog farming" (*The Guardian*, 8 October 2020)
- Xiaowei Wang, "When AI Farms Pigs" (*Blockchain Chicken Farm*, ch. 3)

W, Nov. 18

- Screening: *High Rise Pigs* (Siew Ching Ang, 2025)

Moodboard: 10

F, Nov. 20: WP/WF deadline

Week 13

M, Nov. 23

- Screening: *The Harvest* (Misho Antadze, 2019)

W, Nov. 25: No class, Thanksgiving Break

Week 14

True Hallucinations: Generative Images

M, Nov. 30

Hito Steyerl, *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat* (chs. TBA)

W, Dec. 2

Moodboard: 11

Week 15

M, Dec. 7

Research Project presentations

W, Dec. 9

Research Project presentations

Week 16

M, Dec. 14

Research Project presentations

W, Dec. 16

Research Project presentations

Thur 17 Dec: Last Day of Classes

Policies

Missed classes

We are all adults, so rather than taking attendance on a regular basis, I prefer a different mode of gauging your presence. As mentioned above, I will often have class activities, brief writing exercises, and randomly-taken sign-ins. If you are present for these activities, you will receive points toward the “Reflections and in-class activities” portion of your grade (note that this is something quite aside from your ‘Participation’ grade). If you are not, and you have given me no advance notice of a legitimate reason for your absence, you will receive no points, and your ultimate score will reflect this.

Zoom and attendance

Different classes and professors have differing policies for Zoom attendance in class. Ours is a discussion-oriented class, which will involve in-class activities and group work at points. For this reason, remote attendance is generally not feasible; it both renders these activities difficult, if not impossible, for the remote participant; similarly, having unexpected remote participants requires big shifts in how classes are run. Thus, if you expect to

miss class, please let me know, and I can gauge whether or not it is feasible to zoom in.

Laptops

Please bring your laptops to every class, but in general, we'll have them and your phones put away. This is a discussion-oriented class. Toward that end, the research is starting to pile up that laptop use is thoroughly distracting to others and hurts the classroom environment. Additionally, notetaking is much more effective with pen-and-paper, as you're forced to distill what is going on in the class that much more effectively. Thus, when we meet in person, please be sure to bring your laptop to class, as we may use it for any variety of activities and reflections, but in general, they must be put away unless you are looking up something related to our classroom discussion. Cell phones must be on silent or vibrate and should be put away for the duration of class. There will be no exceptions. Cell phones being used in class will result in them being collected for retrieval at the end of the class session.

AI

Much like any tool, artificial intelligence has its place in particular workflows, and it is an emerging feature of our world, albeit one that is still forming. Its final form, and the ways we'll choose (or have chosen for us) to rearrange our labor, institutions, even societies around it remain to be seen. Dominant players are seeking to obtain and lock-in their own advantage. Unlike a calculator, however, to which I've heard the technology compared, a key facet of it is that it is a technology that its use changes the world in material ways. Anything you enter into an AI engine, your ideas, your valuable information, more, is stored and integrated forever. We're presently in the 'learning' phase of these technologies, and make no mistake, they are absolutely starving for your data, and their backers will make their use easy and cheap to encourage you to use them. With the understanding that elementary, middle, and high schools are all starting to teach students new workflows that utilize AI, it means all of us are thinking deeply about the pedagogical intent of our assignments and redesigning them accordingly. For this reason, for some assignments, I will absolutely restrict the use of AI for pedagogical reasons. There are other

moments where using AI as an idea generation tool or timesaver can be more appropriate. Whether it is or not depends on the circumstance:

- For this reason, when we do any form of written reflections on the readings or other materials, AI use is absolutely forbidden unless noted otherwise. I want your unvarnished impressions, because only by working through theory do we really learn to use it as the tool that it is. Any use of AI on the reading reflections will result in a failing grade on them.
- I want your submitted work to be your own thoughts. AI can be a (sometimes!) useful summarizer and generator of ideas, which is fine, but your work-process and control over ideas needs to be your own. If you're in doubt about the appropriate use of a tool, ask, we're all in a position of learning as we go right now!
- Sometimes using AI image generators is a quick and dirty way of getting something done; other times, it's more useful to hunt for a 'real' image out in the wild, while they still exist: one is a creative tool, the other is actual research, although I can imagine ways in which the former can become the latter in certain contexts. Once again: if you're in doubt about the use of a tool, ask!

Late submissions

Late submissions will NOT be accepted. Deadlines are firm. If you are aware of a conflict that will prevent you from completing an assignment on time, you are responsible to contact the instructor in advance. Emergencies will require written documentation.

Support for individuals impacted by discrimination, harassment, or sexual violence

If you have been impacted by discrimination, harassment, or sexual violence, 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. Your instructor is another resource, but please note that as an Emerson employee, they must share information related to discrimination, harassment, or sexual violence with the Office of Equal Opportunity. If you would like to connect with a confidential resource, please contact the Healing &

Advocacy Center (advocate@emerson.edu, 617-824-8857), the Emerson Wellness Center (emersonwellnesscenter@emerson.edu, 617-824-8666), or the Center for Spiritual Life (spiritual_life@emerson.edu, 617-824-8036).

Support for students with disabilities

Emerson is committed to providing equal access and support to students with disabilities, through the provision of reasonable accommodations, to allow them to fully participate in Emerson programs and activities. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Services for information about the registration process and/or to schedule an appointment (SAS@emerson.edu; 617-824-8592). Students are encouraged to contact SAS early in the semester. Please be aware that accommodations are not applied retroactively.

Plagiarism

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 questions concerning the Emerson plagiarism policy or about documentation of sources in work you produce in this course, speak to your instructor. Additionally, the Working with Research and Avoiding Plagiarism (WRAP) Quiz is available to all students through the Writing and Academic Resource Center's self-enrollment Canvas course. One-on-one consultations are available (emerson.mywconline.com).

Community, culture, and belonging

Among the College's Strategic Plan goals is to "Support a vibrant community culture and experience that fosters creativity, curiosity, belonging, accessibility, and well-being." Diversity of identity, heritage, thought, lived experience, languages, and perspective is valued in our community, and we are committed to cultivating productive learning environments that respect and celebrate our differences. The instructor will make every effort to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students.

If you have concerns or general comments about what Emerson can do to increase innovation, curiosity, creativity, or create more inclusive classroom environments, you may share your suggestions with Dr. Tuesda Evans in Academic Affairs. Her email is tuesda.evans@emerson.edu.

If you have any concerns or suggestions for improving how Emerson approaches its culture or community-building efforts as an institution, please do not hesitate to contact the Community, Culture, and Belonging Division. Their email is ccb@emerson.edu.

Class recording

No one may record any part of this class unless the faculty member has given them express permission to do so. Students who require that a class be recorded due to a disability should work with Student Accessibility Service (SAS) to receive an accommodation for that recording. 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, photographing, transmitting, or publishing the images of those materials or educational records without expressed consent is strictly prohibited. Any student who records a class without the faculty's permission without a registered accommodation will be referred to the Office of Community Standards. Accommodations for recording a class will be honored by your instructor.

Religious accommodations

Students who may have a conflict with a course requirement due to a sincerely held religious belief, practice, or observance, should work with the instructor as soon as possible to identify an accommodation that satisfies the specific need of the student while maintaining the necessary academic requirements. The student will then work with their instructor to find a mutually acceptable way to make up any missed coursework and/or assignments. Any student absence for a religious observance will count toward the total number of absences permitted in the course under the instructor's written attendance policy. For more information see the Student Religious Accommodation Policy.

General support for students

Students may face a variety of challenges during the semester that can impact their well-being and academic performance. These may include but are not limited to: general wellbeing concerns, significant medical or mental health issues, academic pressure or burnout, or major family responsibilities such as caregiving or loss. If you are experiencing difficulties, please know that support is available.

You are encouraged to explore Emerson's ConcernCenter (emerson.concerncenter.com) an interactive tool that connects you with campus resources based on your specific concerns. You may also reach out to the Office of Student Care and Support at care@emerson.edu to help you navigate your situation and resources, or talk with me if you need help identifying next steps.

Support for students concerned about financial resources

Emerson offers a range of resources to support students who may be facing financial challenges. These include:

- The Student Success basic needs pantry (<https://emerson.edu/departments/student-success/food-access-initiatives-and-supplemental-support#pantry>)
- IT Helpdesk loaner laptop program (<https://support.emerson.edu/hc/en-us/articles/19884891607707-IT-Laptop-Vending-Agreement>)
- Open Educational Resources (run through the library; <https://guides.library.emerson.edu/openeducation/oer>)
- Career Closet (<https://emerson.edu/departments/career-development-center/career-closet>)
- Student Assistance Fund (<https://emerson.edu/departments/student-success/student-assistance-fund>)
- free headshot photobooth on Walker 2 (<https://emerson.edu/departments/student-success/food-access-initiatives-and-supplemental-support/iris-headshot-photo-booth>)

- low-to-no-cost resources for students
(<https://emerson.edu/departments/student-success/food-access-initiatives-and-supplemental-support/freelow-cost-resources-students>)
- financial wellness programs (<https://emerson.edu/departments/financial-wellness>)
- and so much more.

If you have a concern about accessing course materials or other essential resources, please reach out to Student Success at studentsuccess@emerson.edu or 617-824-8650 for guidance and support. Please note: for questions specifically related to financial aid or your student billing, contact Financial Aid (finaid@emerson.edu) or Student Accounts (bills@emerson.edu) directly.

Name changes, gender identity, and pronouns

Whenever possible, please notify your instructor of your name or gender pronoun early in the semester, or as you are comfortable doing so. Many of Emerson's record-keeping systems can be formally updated at any time. For more information please visit the Division of Community, Culture, and Belonging's website or the Cultural Engagement Center's website.

Support with immigration accommodations and English language support

The Office of International Student Affairs (OISA) offers English language support services (<https://emerson.edu/departments/international-student-affairs/english-language-learning>) as well as immigration advising to assist international students in maintaining their required full-time registration (<https://emerson.edu/departments/international-student-affairs/immigration-status/maintaining-your-f-1-status/academic-registration>). Students needing English language assistance or immigration accommodations (including an authorized reduced course load for academic or medical reasons in their final term) should contact OISA staff by email at oisa@emerson.edu or by appointment, (<https://emerson.edu/departments/international-student-affairs/contact-us>) or may submit a reduced course load request via Terra Dotta (<http://td.emerson.edu/>).