

CRITICAL THEORY & AI

George Washington University || Alexa Alice Joubin

Honors 2053W
English 2800W

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3 credits

Alexa Alice
Joubin

ajoubin @ gwu.edu



This course introduces students to critical theory in the context of critical AI studies, virtuality, and embodied identities. We focus on theories that are most relevant to our contemporary life. Students will gain fluency in the conceptual frameworks associated with analyses of complex texts and cultural phenomena. More importantly, students will learn how to apply theoretical tools to global films in the interest of producing scholarship that makes a difference.

- History of AI
- AI and Fiction
- AI and Writing
- AI and Globalization
- AI and Society
- Science Fiction
- Embodiment
- Virtuality

Objectives

By the end of this course, students

should be able to:

- Acquire essential tools for understanding critical theory.
- Write and respond to research questions that have strong theses, synthesize information from multiple sources, and break complex ideas into smaller units.
- Apply textual and film analytical skills to answering research questions and developing the final course project.
- Write evidence-based argumentation based on close reading.
- Use theoretical tools and filmmaking skills to complete a short scene adaptation.

Readings

Professor Joubin's open-access online textbook, [Introduction to Critical Theory](https://criticaltheory.info/), <https://criticaltheory.info/>

Critical AI Studies

History of Human & Non-human Entities

What Is Critical Theory?

Tue. Jan 14 Introduction

- Alexa Alice Joubin's [what is critical theory?](#)
- Introduction to Prof Joubin's proprietary [AI Teaching Assistant chatbot](#)
- Try [Chat PDF](#): sample text, Neil McCaw's "[Reading Critical Theory](#)" from *How to Read Texts* 2nd edition
- Sign up for [CampusKnot](#) using the code 8UV6OED6. Free trial till Jan 30.

For reference, not required:

- [Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory](#) (2nd edition), access through GW Libraries (if off campus, turn on GW [VPN](#) first)
- GW [Library Guide to Critical Theory](#)

Book Culture in History

Thur. Jan 16 Field Trip to the Folger Library near Capitol South metro stop (20 min. from Foggy Bottom)

- 201 E Capitol St SE (across from the Supreme Court and Library of Congress)
- Docent-led tour of their [permanent, hands-on exhibit](#) and [Out of the Vault exhibit](#)
- Post a 300-word reflection (to [CampusKnot](#)) on one artifact that interests you, along with a photo you took.
Deadline 5 pm Friday Jan 17.

Tue. Jan 21 Techné & Art: Book as a Form of Technology

- Emma Smith, [Portable Magic: A History of Books and Their Readers, Introduction](#)
- Emma Smith, [Portable Magic, Chapter 1 on Gutenberg](#)
- Norwegian Broadcasting (2001), [Medieval Helpdesk](#), a parody by Knut Nærum
- Joubin's [what is close reading?](#)
- Joubin's [How to ask effective research questions](#)
- Use [Perplexity](#) to refine your research question (demo in class)

Book Culture in the Era of AI

Thur. Jan 23 Representation of Reality

- Plato, [The Republic, Book 7 The Cave Allegory](#), close read pp. 208-213
- Joubin, [History of artificial intelligence](#)
- Joubin, [What is critical writing?](#)
- Try [DeepL](#), an AI-enhanced writing assistance tool

Critical AI Studies

Tue Jan 28 AI and the Craft of Writing

- Joubin, [AI and the craft of writing](#)
- Michel Foucault on [Heterotopias](#)
- George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, [Metaphors We Live By, excerpt](#)
- Responsible uses of AI: [Pattern Recognition & Counter Arguments](#) sample prompts

Critical AI Studies continued

Thur. Jan 30 AI and Social Simulation

- Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, “[The Precession of Simulacra](#)”
- Joubin, [How to analyze film](#)
- Joubin, [AI and Ethics](#)
- In-class analysis of the simulacra scene in *The Matrix* ([read this section of AI and Fiction](#))

Tue. Feb 4 Case Study: *Ex Machina*

- Watch *Ex Machina*, dir. Alex Garland, 2014 ([full film here](#))
- Joubin, [Framing](#)
- Joubin, [AI in Fiction](#); focus on the [sections on embodied AI](#)
- Joubin, [AI and globalization](#)

Ex Machina plot summary

Content transparency note: nudity, violence, profanity, misogyny, racism, surveillance

Caleb, a programmer, is invited to the secluded estate of his firm’s CEO Nathan, to carry out the Turing test to determine the capabilities and consciousness of a sentient AI humanoid named Ava. He also interacts with another humanoid, Kyoko, who is Japanese and does not speak English. The robots may seem subservient, but they have their own plans.

In-class Writing

Comments are evaluated on a scale from 1 to 10, a typical post will receive a 9; 10s are reserved for exceptional (insightful, detailed, and extensive) comments.

Comments that do not indicate close or thoughtful reading will receive a 7 or 8.

Entirely uninformed comments will receive at most a 5 or 6.

You should avoid:

- Questions about terms that can be simply looked up in the dictionary or online. Perhaps consider your understanding of the term, after looking it up, and speculate on how it might be applied or fit in a particular context.
- Open-ended or vague questions that could be applied to practically any author/reading: “I wonder what X would think of digital special effects?” If you want to make these connections, try to answer them yourself, working closely through the text.

Final Project

Your final project can be a short video or a traditional paper.
