

USC School of Cinematic Arts

CNTV-101: Reality Starts Here

Fall 2016—F—1:00-3:50

Location: NCT

Instructor: Jeff Watson
Office: SCI 201J
Office Hours: By appointment

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Prerequisite(s): none
Co-Requisite (s): none
Concurrent Enrollment: none
Recommended Preparation: none

Course Description

How we entertain, and are entertained, speaks volumes about who we are as a society. Entertainment is both an expression and an influencer of the conditions of contemporary life. In this course, we will explore the theory and practice of entertainment, both as a timeless element of society, and as something undergoing radical changes in response to shifts in technology, economics, politics, and other forces. To facilitate this discussion, students will read esoteric and foundational texts, engage in in-class exercises, and have conversations with a range of special guests from the fields of film, television, interactive media, videogames, experience design, and academic research.

Learning Objectives

Students will work together to think critically and expansively about the past and futures of entertainment. Students should expect to emerge from this class with a holistic understanding of entertainment media, along with a set of foundational collaboration skills and peer-to-peer connections designed to support them as they move forward in their respective divisions.

Readings and Reference Materials

All readings will be provided electronically on the course website, <http://cntv101.net>.

Grading Breakdown

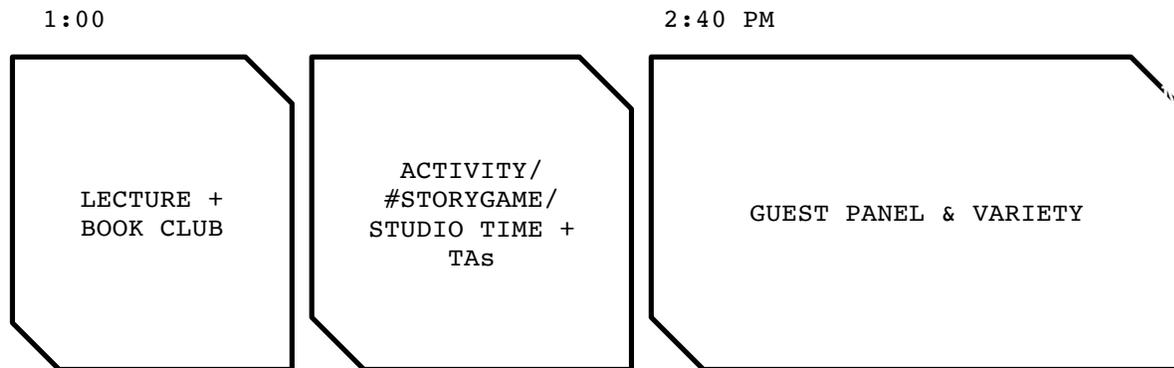
Since this is a credit/no credit class, students will not receive letter or percentile grades for participation in assignments. Unexcused absences or failure to participate in in-class exercises/group activities (see “Assignments, Activities, & Responsibilities” below) will earn students a deduction. **Any student with two deductions will be at risk of failing the class.**

Assignments, Activities, & Responsibilities

Each student will be responsible for the following:

1. **Attendance in every class, for the duration of the class.** If you can't make it to class, you must let us know in writing prior to the beginning of class. Excuses for absences will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. If you are unable to notify us before class, a doctor's note or equivalent will be required to avoid receiving a deduction.
2. **Participation in group activities ("Envelopes").** At the beginning of the semester, you will be assigned a group comprised of approximately 12 students spanning the six divisions of the School. Each week, your group will receive a semi-randomly selected activity "packet." You will be expected to actively participate in all in-class and out of class group activities. These include:
 - a. The "Show Packet." Once a semester, your group will be asked to produce video materials to be shown during class time. Everyone in your group must contribute to the production of these materials.
 - b. The "Documentary Packet." Once a semester, your group will be asked to document in-class and out-of-class activities on social media.
 - c. Speed Networking (a.k.a. "Speed Dating"). At various times throughout the semester, your group will be matched with another group for a networking activity.
 - d. #storygame. At various times throughout the semester, your group will be reshuffled with another group and broken into smaller teams for the purpose of playing #storygame. At the end of the semester, your #storygame team will present a pitch, short film, or interactive demo based on what you create through the play of the game.
 - e. Studio Time. At various times throughout the semester, classtime will be used for "Studio Time." During this time, you will be able to work on creative projects for this class or any other.
3. **Preparation for and participation in Instant Book Club.** Each week, you will be assigned a reading covering some aspect of media theory, art practice, and/or life itself. During Instant Book Club, you may be called upon to come to the stage to discuss the reading. Make sure to be prepared for this eventuality.
4. **Participation in guest interviews.** Each week, one or two students will be chosen at random to lead the discussion with our special guests. To prepare for this eventuality, make sure to pay attention during the guests' presentations.

Standard Class Structure



* student-produced videos shown (see “Show Packet” and “Documentary Packet” above) shown during class opener and gaps between segments

Teaching Team (Fall 2015; Fall 2016 team TBD)

Band

Brian Cantrell, Juri Hwang

Facilitation

Behnaz Farahi
Samantha Gorman
Amanda Tasse

See Also

<http://realitystartshere.com>

Course Schedule

Reality Starts Here

Jeff Watson
USC School of Cinematic Arts

Revision 1.5
Fall 2016

Week 1 – August 26

Theme: Introduction

Introduction to the course and teaching team. Answering the question, “why are we here?” from a variety of ethical, social, and existential perspectives. Discussion of “Design Ecotones” (Pendleton-Julian). Discussion of the mandates of the course, framed as: 1) to make possible peer and community discovery; 2) to create a space for students and faculty to reflect on the present state of entertainment media, its role in/impact on society, its myriad futures, and our responsibilities as citizens and artists; and 3) to open opportunities for creative collaboration and experimentation.

Reading: N/A

Activity: Team Breakdown and Introductions

Scheduled Guests: N/A

Week 2 – September 2

Theme: Worlds

Discussion of how art makes worlds, both fictional and real. Book Club reflections on Borges reading. Introduction to “worldbuilding” and epistemology. A feedback loop is revealed that connects the worlds we imagine to our ways of imagining our own world (“What we imagine the world to be influences how we come to know the world – and vice-versa”).

Reading: Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”

Activity: Envelopes

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Aniko Imre, Alex McDowell**

Week 3 – September 9

Theme: Media

Reflections of the scale of the universe, and our place within it. Brief detour into cosmology, exploring the Fermi Paradox and the notion of “The Great Filter.” What kind of world are we making? What is the “posthuman,” and what responsibilities do we bear as durational artists working with various forms of technology? Book Club discussion of The Medium is the Massage by Marshall McLuhan, foregrounding the famous quote, “**We make our tools and thereafter our tools remake us.**” What are we making, and how does it remake us?

Reading: Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage

Activity: N/A

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Akira Lippitt, Mary Sweeney**

Week 4 – September 16

Theme: Narrative

Exploring the concept of narrative from a range of perspectives. Narrative is shown to infuse and shape every aspect of human sociality. Book Club review of Jerome Bruner reading, exploring connection between narrative and identity, and the role of narrative in the everyday. Basic discussion of narratology and how narrative functions in a range of time-based media forms.

Reading: Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative"

Activity: N/A

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Steve Anderson, Stuart Candy**

Week 5 – September 23

Theme: Fact and Fiction

Discussion investigates the sometimes-fuzzy boundaries between "fact" and "fiction." We ponder the lines we draw between facticity and truth. Book Club takes up Herzog's famous "Minnesota Declaration," and class reflects on the strange capacity of the fictional to lay claim to the true. Vertov's notion of Kino-Pravda. Bazin's notion of indexicality. Discussion of ethics in the context of documentary.

Reading: Werner Herzog, "The Minnesota Declaration"

Activity: Envelopes

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Andreas Kratky, Doe Mayer, Sheila Sofian**

Week 6 – September 30

Theme: Creativity and Course Iteration

Discussion of the creative process. Book Club talks through Ed Catmull's Creativity, Inc. Demonstration of an iterative design process via open class discussion. Tweaking of the course schedule based on evolving interests, discoveries of students and teaching. Students invited to take the lead in a discussion about the purpose and design of their educational experience.

Reading: Ed Catmull, "The Unmade Future" from Creativity, Inc.

Activity: Class structure discussion

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Behnaz Farahi, Jesse Vigil**

Week 7 – October 7

Theme: Pivot

Changes to course based on student feedback from week 6 are described and discussed (in 2015, these involved increasing the size of the Book Club group, integrating student interviewers into the guest segment of the class, and enforcing new rules about seating and laptop use).

Reading: N/A

Activity: Speed Dating

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Linda Brown, Mike Patterson**

Week 8 – October 14

Theme: Space

Narrative and space. Discussion of space and storytelling in film and videogames. Book Club unpacks core concepts from Henry Jenkins article – particularly notions of “embedded” and “emergent” narrative. Brief exploration of immersive theatre, environmental media, and alternate reality games. Discussion of the distinctions between public and private spaces; reflection on the roles played by entertainment in the unfolding of community and state.

Reading: Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture”

Activity: #storygame

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Lisa Mann, Scott Fisher**

Week 9 – October 21

Theme: Play

What is play? Discussion of how entertainment as a category can be understood through the lens of play. Reflections on the implications of making a business out of play. Book Club talks about play via David Foster Wallace’s essay on the psychology of artistic activity.

Reading: David Foster Wallace, “The Nature of the Fun”

Activity: Studio Time + TAs / Speed Dating

Scheduled Guests: N/A

Week 10 – October 28

Theme: Politics

Introduction to cultural studies perspectives on how entertainment media can authenticate, extend, and resist various forms of power – sometimes all at once. Book Club reflects on how film, broadcast media, and the Internet have transformed and expanded the political landscape.

Reading: Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Activity: #storygame

Scheduled Guests (2015): **John August, Pablo Frasconi**

Week 11 – November 4

Theme: Halloween

Screening of David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*.

Reading: N/A

Activity: Screening (David Cronenberg, The Fly)

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Peter Brinson, Marientina Gotsis, Kara Keeling**

Week 12 – November 4

Theme: Social Skills

A *Soylent Green* joke, riffing on our earlier encounter with McLuhan, frames the class: “the medium is people!” Students discuss performative/behavioral impacts of entertainment at a variety of scales.

Reading: N/A

Activity: Speed Dating

Scheduled Guests (2015): **Maureen McHugh, Flint Dille, Michael Taylor**

Week 13 – November 11

Theme: Silence

Discussion of the importance of silence and reflection in the creative process.

Reading: Maria Popova, “Arts of the Possible: Adrienne Rich on Writing, Capitalism, Freedom, and How Silence Fertilizes the Human Imagination”

Activity: Studio Time + TAs

Scheduled Guest (2015): **Chanel Summers**

Week 14 – November 18

Theme: Student-developed focus

Class theme and activities TBD.

Reading: N/A

Activity: TBD

Scheduled Guests: TBD

Week 15 – November 25

NO CLASS (THANKSGIVING)

Week 16 – December 2

Theme: The Future

Speculations on the futures of entertainment, attended by a commendation to the students, readable here: <http://remotedevice.net/blog/reality-is-an-emergency/>

Reading: N/A

Activity: #storygame final pitches/presentations

Scheduled Guests: **Secret guest judges**

END OF CLASSES. THERE IS NO EXAM FOR THIS COURSE.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity <http://equity.usc.edu> or to the Department of Public Safety <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Center for Women and Men <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu> describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information <http://emergency.usc.edu> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.