{MCM901H}: Uncomfortable Media

fall 2012 • cross-listed in TAPS + GNSS

{seminar}
Tuesdays, 4:00-6:20 pm • 155 George Street, Room 106

{screenings}
Thursdays/Sundays, 7:00 pm • 155 George Street, Room 106

{instructor + office hours}
Hunter Hargraves • hunter_hargraves@brown.edu
Wednesdays, 12:00-1:30 pm • 155 George Street, Room 208

{the basic idea}:
Why are we often addicted to that which disgusts us? This course analyzes why “uncomfortable media” – media that plays with notions of the perverse, the abject, and the taboo – remain so popular in the American cultural imaginary. Ranging from reality TV to Hollywood blockbusters; criminal procedural dramas to music videos, this course will approach these transgressive media texts through the twin lenses of analyzing representation (how cultural taboos appear in popular culture) and analyzing spectatorship (how viewers perform discomfort). We will examine how developments in genre and narrative form, affect studies, psychoanalysis, performance studies, and queer theory have contributed to theorizing the perverse and pay special attention to the roles of bodies, both on- and off-screen. At the end of the course, we will have a better idea of what bodily and psychic mechanisms are at work when we welcome the assault of such visceral media.

{required texts}:
• Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle
• Mark Seltzer, Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture
• Kathleen Stewart, Ordinary Affects

All other readings will be made available in .pdf form on OCRA. The password for the course is snooki.

{course requirements}:
• Attendance + Participation: You will be expected to attend all classes on time and to be actively engaged during class, keeping up with the readings by the day assigned. During class, please refrain from any behavior that does not pertain to the class, such as text messaging, chatting online, sending emails, and so on. If you must miss a course, please e-mail me and provide documentation from health services, a physician, or a dean as soon as possible. One unexcused absence will affect your grade; two unexcused absences will prevent you from passing the course.
• Screenings: Attendance at screenings is a crucial and thus mandatory component of the course. Attendance will be taken and more than one unexcused absence will affect your grade. You must attend one of the two screening times for the course. All screenings will be made available in MCM’s archive, located in the basement (room 002).
• Weekly Responses: Once a week, you will be responsible for posting a response about the screenings and the readings prior to class on Canvas, Brown’s new online course interface (https://canvas.brown.edu/). Responses should be approximately 300-450 words, and will allow you to share your questions and
reactions about the material. Ideally, these responses not only engage the material, but also the responses of your peers. Responses must be posted to Canvas by 6:00 pm on the Monday before seminar. We will go over the logistics of this, as well as tips and techniques for crafting provocative and engaging responses, in class.

• Digital Media Annotated Clip + Paper: Using the guidelines from the Creative Commons website (http://search.creativecommons.org/), you will choose a clip from the vast available digital archive – memes, YouTube clips, short webisodes, interactive websites, and other digital paratextual material – and curate it for our screenings. You will sign up for one set of screenings during weeks 3-13 and be responsible for writing annotated screening notes (approximately 450 words) for your clip in lieu of a weekly response. You will also be responsible for writing a short response paper (2-3 pages) situating your clip with the readings for the week, due in seminar.

• Papers: There will be two essays: a midterm of 6-8 pages, and a final of 8-10 pages. Suggested topics and guidelines for these papers will be distributed and discussed in class. Due dates for papers are non-negotiable; no extensions will be granted.

{grade breakdown}:
participation 20%
weekly responses 15%
digital media project 15%
first essay 20%
second essay 30%

{plagiarism}:
Plagiarism, or the use of someone else’s ideas, work, or words without acknowledgment, will not be tolerated. Please familiarize yourself with the contents of Brown University’s Academic Code and conduct yourself accordingly. If you have any questions about how to cite intellectual work properly, please let me know during office hours.

{a note about the material}:
The goal of this course is to explore the popularity of perverse topics in contemporary media cultures. Although the material is more or less situated in the realm of “popular culture” (mainstream “Hollywood” cinema and television), these topics are by their nature designed to shock, upset, and disgust viewers. Some of the topics we will be encountering are white supremacy, rape, pedophilia, incest, brutality, addiction, torture, and representations of pain and fear. That you might be disturbed by some of this material is a strong possibility; please keep this in mind throughout the semester, and embrace your discomfort as a way to think critically about how media texts provoke and disturb the public.

{course timeline}:

{week 1 / september 11} introduction
screening (in class): “Keep It Going Louder” (Major Lazer, dir. Eric Washburn, 2009)

{week 2 / september 18} approaches + schema
• Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Film Quarterly 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.

{week 3 / september 25} disaster
• Slavoj Žižek, “The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape,” In These Times (20 October 2005).

{week 4 / october 2} whiteness

{week 5 / october 9} seriality
• begin Mark Seltzer, Serial Killers.

{week 6 / october 16} violence of/and the child
• Mark Seltzer, Serial Killers (cont.).

screening: Elephant (film); CSI: Miami; Buffy: the Vampire Slayer

{week 7 / october 23} beauty + body

screening: Toddlers and Tiaras; Nip/Tuck; Extreme Makeover; footage from the JonBenét Ramsay scandal

{week 8 / october 30} taboo love, part I: the child, revisited

midterm essay (6-8 pages) due in class

screening: Happiness (film); To Catch a Predator

{week 9 / november 6} taboo love, part II: the family

screening: The X-Files; House, M.D; Sister Wives; a soap opera

{week 10 / november 13} disease
• Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

screening: The Living End (film); Law & Order: SVU
{week 11 / november 20} addiction, part I: cinema

screening: Bad Lieutenant (film); Requiem for a Dream (film)

{week 12 / november 27} banality
- Kathleen Stewart, Ordinary Affects.

Thanksgiving break • no screening this week

{week 13 / december 4} addiction, part II: television

screening: Intervention; Hoarders; Extreme Couponing; Bad Sex; What’s Eating You?

{week 14 / december 11} conclusion
- [recommended]: Avital Ronell, “Hits” and “Toward a Narcoanalysis,” from Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992): 1-64.

screening: Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire (film)

final essay (8-10 pages) due december 18 at 5:00 pm in my mailbox