

DIGITAL/CRITICAL--OR, THE DIGITAL DEATH OF CRITICAL STUDIES

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In the winter of 2006, the Electronic Critique Program at the University of Detroit Mercy was renamed as the Digital Media Studies Program. This alteration of the 5 year-old program was perceived as a simple change of nomenclature by an eager marketing department. But it implied much more. This presentation is about the genesis of a digital media curriculum designed to critique the impact of digital media on the human condition. Many institutions are calling for an enhanced focus on critical thinking skills to combat the chaos of the information age. But what is the rationale a humanities based program such as Electronic Critique, and how can it survive in the rigor-obsessed technobureaucracy of the modern university? Is there any place for critique in a culture of ironic, self-deprecating advertisements and DVD voiceovers? These are the questions we will explore at IDMAA, which has yet to offer a conference panel on digital criticism.

Electronic Critique was founded in 1999, approved by an otherwise conservative board of directors taken in by the dot.com boom. “Perhaps,” they might have thought, “this media program might add some value to an otherwise dismal College of Liberal Arts.” Now that the both the dot.com boom and the critical theory boom have passed, the idea of having humanities students learn media development for the sake of critique seems to have lost its value. In an academic culture dominated by a business model, administrators, students, and their parents all want to know what the payoff will be for those who major in “E-Crit.” The notion that students will learn to be critical media consumers is not sufficiently convincing. It seems that the only way to ensure enrollments is to stress the production side of the curriculum. But, as O’Gorman argues in this proposal, it is possible to teach production and critique simultaneously, through the development of digital-critical projects that mobilize critical theory in the content of new media artifacts.

Rombes, on the other hand, views the entire enterprise of critique as redundant act in a postmodern culture. How do you deconstruct the consumerist agenda of a corporation when its web site readily pokes fun at the frivolity of the product, and flouts the greed of the corporation? How do you extract close readings of films when the director provides a play-by-play interpretation on DVD, complete with a deconstruction of lighting, camera angles, and script alterations? What is the next step, if any, for cultural studies and film criticism?

While O’Gorman will argue for the necessity of integrating critical theory into all digital media curriculums, Rombes will discuss the futility of this strategy. The presentation will offer several lucid examples of “digital/critical” student projects (serious video games, critical video, *subvertising*, etc.) that are easily replicable by instructors and students of digital media. But these will be countered by examples of cultural products that “self-deconstruct.” In the end, our goal is to bring the audience into this discussion, in the hope of determining the place of critical studies in the digital media curriculum.