

COMM 3012

Media, Adulthood, and Aging in Modern America

Spring 2024

MW 3:30-5:00pm
ASC 224

Instructor: Arthur Wang
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Office Hours by Appointment



Course Description

This seminar course examines how mass media reflect and resist norms of adulthood and aging. Frequently defined as an endpoint — a biological inevitability, a completion of development, an achievement of maturity — adulthood is neither simple nor static. Media for children and adolescents, for example, often depict adulthood as a paradox: both exciting and boring; free of oversight and burdened by responsibility; the beginning of real life and a kind of death. Students will learn interdisciplinary and multimodal humanistic methods for understanding the mediated history of adulthood. Topics include the emergence of young adulthood as a life stage, a key demographic in consumer culture, and a popular genre; fantasies of nonlinear aging like intergenerational body-swaps, aging backward, and agelessness; quarter-life, midlife, and end-of-life crises; infantilization and other discriminatory exclusions from adulthood; gender and

rhetorics of proper aging; and failures and refusals to age appropriately, from the man-child to the *Golden Girls*.

Grading

Participation 20%

Midterm Paper (5-6 pages, keywords assignment) 30%

Final Paper (8-10 pages, research essay) 50%

Course Schedule

Introduction to the Life Course	
Week 1 Defamiliarizing the Life Course	
Meeting 1	Course introduction
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” ([1922] 2003) ● Recommended: Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device” ([1919] 2017)
Week 2 Denaturalizing the Life Course	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Roland Barthes, preface, “Toys,” and “The Great Family of Man” in <i>Mythologies</i> (1991) ● Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction: Queer and Not Now,” in <i>Time Binds</i> (2010) ● Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, “Introduction to Chronological Age: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” (2020)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ted Chiang, “Story of Your Life” (2002)
Unit One Out of Place Becoming an Adult	
Week 3 Disaffected Youth	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Paul Goodman, excerpt from <i>Growing Up Absurd</i> (1960) ● Saidiya Hartman, excerpt from <i>Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments</i> (2020) ● Matt Wolf, excerpt from <i>Teenage</i> (2013) ● Recommended: Elliot E. Cohen, “A Teen-Age Bill of Rights,” <i>New York Times</i>, January 7, 1945
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Octavia E. Butler, “Bloodchild” (1984)
Week 4 (Young) Adult Content: Age Ratings and Censorship	

Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student’s Choice: age ratings systems in film, television, music, comic books, and video games ● John Durham Peters, “Preludes to a Theory of Obscenity” (2011) ● American Library Association Labeling and Ratings Systems Q&A (2007)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● David Pardo and Leah Wolchok, <i>Judy Blume Forever</i> (2023) ● Recommended: Betty Carter, “Adult Books for Young Adults” (1997)
<p>Week 5 On the Clock: Work and Careers</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Richard Sennett, excerpts from <i>The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism</i> (1999) ● E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” (1967) ● Recommended: David Graeber, excerpt from <i>Bullshit Jobs</i> (2018)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jill Sprecher, <i>Clockwatchers</i> (1998)
<p>Week 6 Looking Back at Young Adulthood</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Joseph Slaughter, “Bildungsroman-Knstlerroman” (2010) ● Elizabeth E. Guffey, excerpt from <i>Retro: The Culture of Revival</i> (2006) ● Simon Reynolds, introduction, <i>Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past</i> (2011) ● Recommended: Reynolds, “Lost in the Shuffle: Record Collecting and the Twilight of Music as an Object,” in <i>Retromania</i> (2011) ● Spotify Nostalgia Playlist
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● David Mirkin, <i>Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion</i> (1997) ● Willard Spiegelman, “Proust Goes to the Country Club” (2014)
<p>Unit Two Out of Sync Exclusion and Dissent from Adulthood</p>	
<p>Week 7 Age Gap Discourse and the Age of Consent</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Joseph J. Fischel, “Numbers, Sex, Power: Age and Sexual Consent,” in <i>Sex and Harm in the Age of Consent</i> (2016)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Amia Srinivasan, “On Not Sleeping With Your Students,” in <i>The Right to Sex</i> (2021)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Todd Haynes, <i>May December</i> (2023)
<p>Week 8 Disability and the Myth of “Mental Age”</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Michael Gill, “Sexual Ableism Exposed,” in <i>Already Doing It: Intellectual Disability and Sexual Agency</i> (2015) ● Dorothy Roberts, “Can Research on the Genetics of Intelligence Be ‘Socially Neutral’?” (2015) ● Stefan C. Dombrowski, “The Dark History of IQ Tests” <i>TED-Ed</i> (2020)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Daniel Keyes, “Flowers for Algernon” (1959)
<p>Week 9 Arrested Development and the Inner Child</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Marilyn Ivy, “Have You Seen Me? Recovering the Inner Child in Late Twentieth-Century America” (1993) ● Barbara Johnson, “Using People: Kant with Winnicott” (2014)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Barry Jenkins, <i>Moonlight</i> (2016) ● Recommended: Victoria Nelson, “Prodigious” (2023)
<p>Unit Three Out of Time Ageism is Getting Old</p>	
<p>Week 10 Crisis!</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Susanne Schmidt, “Feminist Origins,” in <i>Midlife Crisis: The Feminist Origins of a Chauvinist Cliché</i> (2020) ● Recommended: Schmidt, introduction to <i>Midlife Crisis</i> ● Recommended: Kieran Setiya, “Missing Out,” in <i>Midlife: A Philosophical Guide</i> (2017)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● David Mazzucchelli, excerpt from <i>Asterios Polyp</i> (2009) ● Recommended: Scott McCloud, “Time Frames” and “Living in Line,” in <i>Understanding Comics</i> (2017) ● Recommended: Wendy HK Chun, “Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or the

	Temporality of Networks,” in <i>Updating to Remain the Same</i> (2016)
<p>Week 11</p> <p>“Too Old”: Ageism and Anti-Aging</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Phyllis Rose, “The Forest Dweller and the Beggar” (2004) ● Margaret Morganroth Gullette, “The Eskimo on the Ice Floe,” in <i>Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America</i> (2013) ● Recommended: Rebecca Hersher, “Why You Probably Shouldn’t Say ‘Eskimo,’” <i>NPR</i> (2016) ● Recommended: Edward Said, “Timeliness and Lateness,” in <i>On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain</i> (2009)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>The Comeback</i> S1E12, “Valerie Shines Under Stress” and S1E13, “Valerie Does Another Classic Leno” ● Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jane Fonda episode of <i>Wiser Than Me</i> podcast (April 2023)
<p>Week 12</p> <p>Love, Social Reproduction, and the Biological Clock</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Moira Weigel, “Dates,” “Tricks,” and “Likes,” in <i>Labor of Love</i> (2016) ● Short videos on social reproduction theory by Silvia Federici and Tithi Bhattacharya ● Recommended: Briallen Hopper, “On Spinsters” (2015) ● Recommended: Heather Love, “Playing for Keeps” (2019)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● SPECIAL GUEST LECTURE: Professor Moira Weigel (Northeastern University) ● Moira Weigel, “Plans” and “Love” in <i>Labor of Love</i>
<p>Week 13</p> <p>Friendship and Care at the End of Life</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alice Sun, “Shrinking Family Sizes May Change Our Experience with Aging,” <i>Scientific American</i> (2024) ● Carol J. Adams, “Towards a Philosophy of Care through Caregiving” (2017) ● Recommended: Eric Klinenberg, “Aging Alone,” in <i>Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone</i> (2013)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Grace and Frankie</i> S2E12, “The Party” and S2E13, “The Coup” (2016) ● <i>Golden Girls</i> S1E25, “The Way We Met” (1986) and S3E1, “Old

	<p>Friends” (1987)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recommended: Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” (1997) ● Recommended: Nancy K. Miller, “Diane Middlebrook,” in <i>My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism</i> (2019)
<p>Week 14</p> <p>Student’s Choice: Time Travel and Deep Time</p>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Christopher Nolan, <i>Interstellar</i> (2014) (first half) ● Excerpt from Stephen Jay Gould, <i>Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle</i> (1987) ● Recommended: David Wittenberg, “Introduction: Time Travel and the Mechanics of Narrative,” in <i>Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative</i> (2013)
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Christopher Nolan, <i>Interstellar</i> (2014) (second half) ● Vincent Ialenti, “Conclusion: Escaping Shallow Time Discipline,” in <i>Deep Time Reckoning: How Future Thinking Can Help Earth Now</i> (2020) ● Recommended: David Wood, “What Is to Be Done? Democracy and Beyond,” in <i>Deep Time, Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human</i> (2019)