

EN 264: Essay 1 questions, 2015-16

An essay of 5,000 words – or 2,500 words for the 50/50 option – is due on Tuesday, 12 January 2016 (Week 1 of Term 2). The following topics are intended to offer only suggested directions for your own thinking and research; feel free to adapt or develop your own topic in consultation with me beforehand (titles should be confirmed by Friday, 11 December 2015).

1. What is hidden about the ‘hidden abode of production,’ as Marx portrays it? Explore the ramifications of this hiddenness in terms of any aspect of social and cultural life under capitalism.
2. Discuss the significance of the passage from *formal* to *real subsumption* of the means of labour, as outlined in the *Grundrisse* and expanded in Postone’s work.
3. Do a reading of Pixar’s *Toy Story*, or another text/cultural artifact of your choice, in light of Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism, particularly in relation to the ‘communication’ taking place between commodities. Does your case study counter, complicate and/or substantiate Marx’s analysis?
4. Discuss the ‘phantom-like objectivity’ conferred on the commodity by exchange value, according to Marx. What implications does this phantasmic quality have for the categories of the ‘real,’ the ‘material’ and the ‘objective’ in critical theory and/or cultural representation?
5. “[O]nce adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the *machine*, or rather, an *automatic system of machinery* ... set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself” (Marx, “The Fragment on Machines”). Analyse the vision of automation as perfected means of production in the *Grundrisse*.
6. “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*). What are the implications of this formula for grasping the logic of spectacular society?
7. Write an essay on the presence and function of ‘the Big Screen’ in Warwick’s Student Union piazza, examined through the lens of Debord’s analysis.
8. Explore the theory of ‘immaterial’ or cognitive labour as the supposed defining feature of late capitalist or neoliberal society. How are so-called immaterial and material forms of labour to be thought together today? Are you persuaded that the latter represents a qualitatively different mode of production from those specific to earlier forms of capitalism?
9. Examine the ‘circuits of labour’ (Qui et al.) employed in production of the iPhone and assess the possibilities of counter-commodification practice involving use or appropriation of the iPhone. See, for example, “Phone Story” by Molleindustria games; the independent film *Tangerine*, shot on an iPhone; *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, a monologue by Mike Daisey.

10. Write an essay on the relationship between concrete and abstract time under capitalism, according to Postone. What might be required to 're-concretise' or materialise time in a situation where its abstraction serves as the measure of value?

11. Against theories of the 'creative class' and 'immaterial labour,' Sarah Brouillette calls for renewed attention to a labour theory of aesthetic production. Assess her point by comparing the production process of (1) a Damien Hirst sculpture; (2) a Hollywood film; (3) a literary novel. Can we speak of 'socially necessary labour time' in these cases?

12. Nick Dyer-Witheford argues that the processes of automation are moving on from lower-wage factory and office work to the upper reaches of the labour market: lawyers, stockbrokers, teachers, journalists, photographers, pop stars. Assess the implications of a global system in which such workers "are rendered surplus to requirements by an increasingly automatic capitalism."