

## **Media Theory: Critical Reading Response (500 points or 50%)**

Reading and understanding theory is a marathon, not a sprint. Consequently, you will continuously engage with theory through written responses. While each response is short, the accumulative value of the responses makes them the most important assignment of the course. Do not underestimate them.

You will receive an individual grade for each response (5x100 points). I also take into account evidence of significant improvement during the semester; this can boost your final grade for your assignment.

### **Due Dates**

If you write for Monday, responses are due by 11:55pm that day via email.

If you write for Thursday, responses are due as hard copy in class.

Groups switch off; in other words, you will complete a response every two weeks (except in weeks when papers are due). Response due dates are staggered throughout the week, so see the reading schedule for your group's due dates.

### **Format for Responses: 1 + 1 + 1 = 1 page.**

*One quote* from an assigned reading for the day + *one-paragraph response* to the quote that relates it to the key points of the reading + *one connection* to another reading (from the same week), all in *one page*.

Your essays must be written in Times New Roman or Calibri 11-point font, and must fit on one page only. Beyond that, you can play with the margins and structure to squeeze in as much as you want. Minimum word count is 700 words, *excluding* the quote at the beginning.

The writing style should be formal—in other words, you can't write this in half an hour and call it done. Your response needs to be a well-crafted piece of writing. See the example below for an excellent response.

*The following habits will have an adverse effect on your grade for this assignment:*

- sloppy writing
- consistently choosing quotes from the first or last pages of a reading (suggesting you skipped or skimmed the middle)

- consistently choosing from the shortest or easiest reading

*The following habits will have a positive effect on your grade for this assignment:*

- concise and engaging writing that suggests you revised this response at least once
- unexpected or unusual connections to other readings that not only illustrate your quote+response, but expand it (this may include examples that challenge an author's argument)
- as the semester goes on, making connections to other readings beyond the current week

**Sample Response (854 words):**

“All of these vids work to heal wounds created by the marginalization, displacement, and fragmentation of female characters like Star Trek's Number One, restoring female subjectivity and community by editing together what was put asunder. To be a vidder is to work to reunite the disembodied voice and the desiring body, and to embark on this project is to be part of a distinctive and important tradition of female art” (2008)

In *Women, Star Trek and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding*, Francesca Coppa discusses the history of fan vidding and the potential for it to serve as a tool to both resituate and critically examine female representation. In the above quotation, the author reflects on the impact vidding could have on how women see themselves, or, more appropriately, desire to see themselves. Much of the vehicle which the author uses is Star Trek's short-lived female character Number One. Her brief time in the Pilot episode of the show and subsequent disappearance left a symbolic gap of representation that was eventually filled by Spock. As a result, Spock served as a prime source for the vidding done by fans who yearned for Number One to step out of the shadows. Interestingly, the actress who played Number one does eventually return but plays very different roles which highlights both the representation of women and the male gaze. Coppa explains “[i]t is hard not to see Barrett's transformation from Number One to Christine Chapel as a degradation on every level: role, status, and image.” The degradation that the author refers to seems to carry with it very serious implications of female representation. By subjugating a strong female character who was physically equal and mentally superior to her male counterpart, to the role of a sexualized stereotype and a disembodied voice gives a clear message: either you're seen as a sexualized object, or you are not seen at all. In light of this, it is no wonder that female fans of the show have gone to the lengths of creating a new visual art form to both critique and illuminate these issues. The way in which the vidders frame Spock as the stand in for Number One is especially interesting. As the author notes, Spock is half human and half alien. His struggle is one of constant identity negotiation. In this way, Spock's character can parallel the duality which women are expected to live in. He is a stand in and it his gaze that some vidders use to frame their work. It is especially interesting when you think of the position of the vidders in relation to Spock. They

are accomplished women, who see their gender portrayed through a phallogentric gaze that often denigrates their role in society. Simultaneously, they're huge fans of the show and must negotiate their own gendered identity with their fandom. Therefore, it makes sense that Spock would be a character to identify with, but also feeling the need to take on an oppositional gaze. One that reframes the show that they love and challenges its traditionally rigid gender construction.

Similarly, bell hooks argues in *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* that black spectators can employ an oppositional gaze to challenge the construction of black identity through a gaze of white domination. This is done by watching films critically and refusing to do so without the necessary historical context. Further, hooks speaks to the need to deconstruct and disrupt the very form of the film. To be completely aware of what is going on before your eyes. In this way, hooks argument for the oppositional gaze parallels what Coppa suggests the vidders are doing. By disrupting, and in some cases, physically deconstructing actual film, the gaze becomes not only oppositional but operational. Meaning, the oppositional gaze becomes reproducible and distributable. However, there is one big difference in the oppositional gaze discussed by hooks and Coppa. In Coppa's example, there appears to be a prerequisite of fandom. Or, at the very least, a general admiration shared by the vidders. The vidders that Coppa identifies are active in fan movements. Meaning that they began as fans of the show, who, while not watching the show entirely uncritically, did have an experience that differed greatly from what hooks speaks of. The idea of fandom as a jumping off point for critical analysis presents another problem when considering hooks analysis. Specifically, vidders identity allowing them to move seamlessly between fandom and oppositional force. Thinking about the example of vidder Kandy Fong taking her vid's on the road to comic con and directly benefiting the very apparatus of oppression she is critiquing in the only way that it cares, monetarily. Perhaps, most notably was Star Trek's director's willingness to share film with Fong because he was wanting to capitalize off fandom like hers to make a new Star Trek film. In this way, being raised without the oppositional gaze and having your roots in the film industries oppressive history complicates any attempt to employ an oppositional gaze. Especially when your activities have become co-opted by the establishment to gain monetarily from your work.