Critical Cultural Theory:

Walter Benjamin/Theodore Adorno

IDSEM.UG 16Fall 2011

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Hours: Tuesday, 10:30-12:30; 2-4; Wednesday, by appointment

In this course, our goal, first and foremost, will be to engage directly and closely with the writing of two of the twentieth century’s most remarkable and important thinkers. Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno are both generally associated with the “Frankfurt School,” although in the case of Benjamin, the association is more complex. Interclooctors, colleagues of a sort, Benjamin and Adorno are two of the most important twentieth-century thinkers on culture, history, politics and society; their work has continued to influence generations of critical theorists.
Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a literary critic, philosopher and social theorist whose work has proven enormously influential across a number of disciplines, including literary study, media and popular culture studies, urban studies and political theory. Closely associated with the Frankfurt School, Benjamin’s work is itself interdisciplinary, drawing from Marxism, psychoanalysis, sociology, literature and religion. Perhaps more to the point, Benjamin’s thinking is metadisciplinary in so far as it invites us to think carefully about the way knowledge is constituted in modern societies this course, we will spend time reading some of his major essays as well as parts of his great unfinished Arcades Project in order to attempt to track the thinking of one of the twentieth century’s most astute and complex analysts of culture and politics. While we will also look at some central secondary writing on Benjamin, we will focus most closely on reading his work.

Theodor Adorno (1903-69) was a philosopher, cultural theorist, music theorist and with Max Horkheimer, the central force in the Frankfurt School. His work, departing from the philosophical tradition of German idealism, draws from Marxism, psychoanalysis, and sociological thought. His sometimes controversial writings on literature, popular culture in the middle of the twentieth century, the category of experience in modernity, and the aftermath of the Holocaust repeatedly call us back to the question of the relation of politics, culture and the ethical. Adorno’s work is dense and often difficult to read; we will consult some of the leading secondary sources on his writing, but we will apply most of our energy to examining closely some key shorter texts concerned with literature, art, and politics closely. Our goal is to familiarize ourselves with some of Adorno’s writing on these topics; more broadly, we will try to understand the stakes of his impassioned critique of modernity and the ethical import of this project.

Our course, then, will be divided into two sections. In the first, we will read and reflect upon some of the central work of Walter Benjamin; in the second section, we will attend to the writings of Theodore Adorno. Throughout we will pursue some broad questions: What are some ways of thinking the links between politics and culture? What is modernity? How can we think about historical change? How does history present itself in the materials of culture?

READINGS:

The following texts are available at the NYU Bookstore—and elsewhere. Other texts will be available via your blackboard site. A list of suggested readings for the ambitious will also be provided to you shortly.

Benjamin, Illuminations

Benjamin, Reflections

Benjamin, The Arcades Project

Becket, Endgame and Act Without Words

Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment

Adorno, Minima Moralia

Adorno, The Culture Industry

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Written Assignments:

- Short response writing each week
  These should be brought in some form to class and are to be considered aids in discussion; in developing your thoughts, you should not worry about whether you have ‘the right’ reading or answer; rather use these short notebook entries to figure out where your questions are, what doesn’t make sense to you, where you want to probe more deeply.

- Two 7-10 page papers, one due at the midterm and one due at the end of the term.
  While I will offer you a list of possible topics for these, you will also have latitude in choosing your topics in order to connect them, perhaps, to your own concentrations and special interests.

Rules of the Road:

Because this is a seminar, your preparation and participation are of the essence. Come to class prepared. More than three absences will not only jeopardize your ability to keep up with the class, but will injure your grade. Please be on time; excessive lateness will also affect your grade.

An important note on academic integrity:

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.
Class Schedule

Please note: this schedule is subject to changes depending on class interests and other factors.

September

7: Introductions. Who Was Walter Benjamin?


Part One: Media


19: “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century;” Arcades sections tba

Part Two: Memory

21: “A Berlin Chronicle”

26: “The Image of Proust” [supplement: selected passages from Proust, Swann’s Way]

Part Three: Benjamin and Baudelaire

28: Baudelaire, poems from Les Fleurs du Mal

October

3: “On some motifs in Baudelaire;” other texts tba

5: Benjamin reading Baudelaire cont’d.

10: October Break

Part Four: Allegory and Dialectical Image

12: fr. The origin of the German Mourning Play

17: Convolute N, Arcades Project

19: allegory and dialectical image cont’d.

24: Politics, History, Messianism

“The Theses on the Philosophy of History”

26: “Theses...” cont’d.

31: Midterm Papers Due.

Who was Theodore Adorno? Readings: Jay, Adorno, Chapter 1, “A Damaged Life”; Correspondence, Adorno/Benjamin

November

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2: Adorno on the Culture Industry and Cultural Criticism
   “Cultural Criticism and Society;” “The culture industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”
9: “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda;” “How to Look at Television” [Bernstein]
14: Adorno on Composers
   “Wagner’s Relevance Today;” “Alban Berg”
See Berg, Wozzeck at Avery Fisher Library
16: Adorno and Becket, Happy At Last [sort of?]
Becket, Endgame; Read Playscript; see performance on Youtube
21: Adorno, “Trying to understand Endgame”
23: Damaged Life and the Destruction of Experience
   Minima Moralia
28: Minima Moralia, cont’d
30: Minima Moralia, cont’d
December 5: Philosophy and Art After Auschwitz
   “After Auschwitz,” Negative Dialectics; “Education after Auschwitz”
7: “The Meaning of Working Through the past;” selections from Aesthetic Theory
12: “Commitment”
14: Final class. Wrap up.

All final papers due 12/15 by 6 pm. Electronic submissions welcomed; paper submissions fine.