Literary and Cultural Theory: An Interdisciplinary Introduction

Fall 2012

K20.1314/ Monday-Wednesday 4:55-6:10

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Theory: Gk. theoria; a looking at, viewing, contemplation, speculation...also a sight, spectacle...

“I believe that theory begins to supplant philosophy (and other disciplines as well) at the moment it is realized that thought is linguistic or material and that concepts cannot exist independently of their linguistic expression.” Fredric Jameson, “Symptoms of Theory or Symptoms For Theory?”

Description: This course functions as a form of introduction, aspiring to depth as well as breadth. We will be examining some of the dominant theoretical trends that have shaped and continue to shape work in the humanities and social sciences. We hear about ‘theory’ and we hear an array of names associated with it—Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Adorno, and so on—very often. That which falls under the broad (and often ill-defined) rubric ‘theory’ has helped scholars develop the kinds of questions that get asked, the kinds of topics that get investigated, in a variety of disciplines today. Literary and cultural theory, in fact, underwrites in large measure notions of the interdisciplinary. All too often, however, the work of theoreticians themselves seems difficult to access and hard to read. In this course, we will examine several questions that arise for those of us interested in the relation of theory to interdisciplinary study. What is theory anyway? How does it help us to develop approaches and questions for study? What are some influential theoretical schools and theoreticians? What do they say and how might they be related to one another?

In this course, we’ll work to acquire knowledge of the genealogy of contemporary literary and cultural theory, to acquire a degree of proficiency in using one or more central approach in order to read texts; and by attending to some of the conflicts raised around and within contemporary theory, to raise questions about the status of the theoretical in framing knowledge, in helping us think about what constitutes knowledge in the humanities and in some of the social sciences.
Required Texts:

Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*

Barry, P., *Beginning Theory*

Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Photocopied essays, etc, available via Blackboard

General Requirements:

Attendance and participation are necessary. Repeated absences will affect your grade negatively. This course is a seminar and therefore your preparedness and participation are essential. You must be on time; lateness not only affects your class performance but distracts everyone else. Just as in the movie theatre and at Carnegie Hall, please turn off your phones and electronic devices during class.

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.

Required Writing: In a lot of ways, this course is deeply focused on writing. Here’s why, in a nutshell: writing is the single most powerful way of apprehending what you read and this is especially the case where the reading is abstract and difficult, as ours will often be this semester. You’ll be asked to keep a ‘response notebook’ in which you will write frequent brief responses to your reading. In addition, you’ll be writing four essays, three of which will be in the 3-5 page vicinity and one of which will be in the 5-7 page vicinity. The first two essays ask you to put some theoretical texts in dialogue with literary and filmic texts. The third essay asks you to develop a discussion of two theorists whose views seem to you to be similar or strikingly different. The fourth essay is ‘open topic;’ you will be asked to choose a particular approach or theorist in whom you have an especial interest and develop a discussion.
Class Schedule *

September 5: Introductions
Speculating...on literature and other things
September 10: The force of form
Ryan, Chapter 1
Assorted poems
September 12: Stevenson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde
September 17: MM Bakhtin, fr. The Dialogic Imagination
September 19: Signs of Structuralism
Barry, on structuralism
Saussure, fr. A Course in General Linguistics; Jakobson, “Two Types of Language...”

September 26: Todorov, “The Structural Study of Analysis of Narrative”

October 1: First paper Due *

Analyze THAT! Psychoanalysis and its Vicissitudes
October 3: Freud, fr. The Interpretation of Dreams
October 8: David Lynch, Blue Velvet; Freud, “The Uncanny”
October 15-16: Fall Break
October 22: Lacan, cont’d.
Second paper due.

October 24: Ideology and Economics: Reading Marx and After Marx
Marx, “The German Ideology;” “Theses on Feuerbach;”
October 29: Marx, cont’d: Commodities;
October 31: Horkheimer and Adorno, “The culture industry as mass deception;” Adorno, “Free Time”
November 5: Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”
November 7: Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”
November 12: Zizek, “The Sublime Object of Ideology”

November 14: What Doesn’t Get Said: The Claims of Post-Structuralism
Third paper due
November 19: Derrida, “Differance;” and TBA.
November 21: Derrida, cont’d.
November 26: Foucault, “The Discourse on Language”
November 28: Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms”
December 3: Foucault, fr. Security, Territory, Populations
December 5: Ranciere, “Politics and Literature”
December 10: Ranciere, cont’d.
December 12: Last class. Final Papers due. Discussion and Wrap up.

*Some parts of this schedule may change as we go along, depending on class interests
**You can submit your papers in two ways: hard copy or electronically. If you choose to submit your paper electronically, please make sure that it is in Word or .rtf format. Please do not submit .pdf files.