M.A. Proseminar: Modernity and the Human

Fall 2013
Wednesday, 6.20–9 pm
One Washington Place, 501
Sara Murphy/sara.murphy@nyu.edu
Office Hours: M, W 1–3 and by appointment
212-992-7755
"I think, therefore I am."

*Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method*

"What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, a week or even a month old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, can they *reason*? Nor, can they *talk*? But, can they *suffer*?"

*Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

"Hitherto, men have always formed wrong ideas about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be."

*Karl Marx, The German Ideology*

"The virtue of humanity is essentially modern."

*The London Times, January 1867*

"...Man is an invention of recent date. And perhaps one nearing its end."

*Michel Foucault, The Order of Things*

"I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess."

*Donna Haraway, A manifesto for cyborgs*

**Course Description.** The conjunction of the two terms of our title, one a temporal marker, one designating an ontological–epistemological category, will not only provide us with a kind of laboratory for thinking interdisciplinarily, but also bring us to some of the most interesting and controversial sites where the very nature of the ‘interdisciplinary’ is currently being contested. Modernity has not only reshaped the human; in doing so, it has also produced sustained reflections on the nature of human
being. Modernity has tended to define the human differentially, over against non-human nature, with ambiguous results for those values modernity allegedly has championed most robustly. Recently, theorists have sought to interrogate modernity's vision of the human, interrogating in substantive ways what has seemed a transparent category; while some thinkers have pressured the post-structuralist challenge to the individualist subject by turning to networks and systems theory, others have wondered about the hybridity of humans and machines, and still others have queried the solidity of the distinction of the human and the animal. In taking up the conceptual intersection of modernity and human, then, we will rely both on historically-important texts in philosophy, literature, and political science to think about the way in which modernity constitutes and reflects upon the human as its central category; we will also turn to a small group of recent theorists to investigate the ways in which they have challenged and revised both of our key terms.

**Objectives.** This course has as its primary goal the introduction of some methods of interdisciplinary study through serious and sustained engagement in our topic. Students will learn how different kinds of scholars and writers approach a common question or set of questions. Through discussion and analysis of the assigned readings, we will examine how scholars deploy different theoretical optics, how they build an archive of materials, and how they develop research questions. These are all skills that, regardless of the students' particular area of study, they will need to pursue their own individualized and interdisciplinary projects. Through weekly writing assignments, presentations, and a research project, students will expand and refine the basic skill sets that they will use throughout their graduate careers.

**Texts.** Books for this course will be available at the NYU Bookcenter on Broadway. It is preferable that you use the edition ordered. Essays and articles will be available on the NYU Classes site for this course. These are designated in the Class Schedule with an asterisk.

Books:


Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*.

Wells, H. G. *The Isle of Doctor Moreau*.

Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*


**Expectations.** It is expected that you will attend class, be on time, and prepared to participate fully. Assignments should be submitted on the day that they are due. This is a seminar and therefore your active participation as a member of our small scholarly community is essential. Please leave your cell phone off during class, just as you would on an airplane or at Carnegie Hall. You are welcome to bring other devices to class as long as they are used in the service of your class work.

**Statement 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.


**Assignments**

- reader response journal, in which you will write responses to class readings in preparation for seminar sessions.

- each student will present one class reading and lead discussion

- Proposal for Seminar Paper: a document to be submitted at mid-term, articulating the topic of your seminar paper, the research question, and a provisional bibliography
• seminar paper: a substantial research [15-20 page] paper entailing research and analysis on a
topic to be chosen by the student individually with my assistance

• Class Conference Presentation: based on your seminar paper

• Respondent to a peer researcher: you will serve as a respondent to one other student’s seminar
presentation

Class Schedule

(please note: schedule might change a bit depending on class interests, etc)

Week One/September 4. Introductions.

  • Reading: Mary Wollstonecraft, *Frankenstein.*

Week Two/September 18. Enlightenment Modernity and the Human

  • Readings: Descartes, "Discourse on Method"

Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?"*

Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" *

Bostrom, N., "The History of Transhumanism" *

optional. Barthes, “The Family of Man,” [from *Mythologies*; in Badmington]


Week Three/September 25. Humans and Animals

  • Darwin, "The Expressions of Emotion in Man and Animals"*

  • Documents from nineteenth-century vivisection debates*

  • H. G. Wells, *The Isle of Dr. Moreau*
Week Four/October 2.


Week Five/October 9.

- Derrida, *The Animal that therefore I am*

- Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Part one. *We have never been human*

Week Six/October 16.

- Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

- Hayles, K. "Liberal Subjectivity Imperilled;" "Turning Reality Inside Out and Right Side Out. Boundary Work in the Mid-Sixties Novels of Philip K. Dick"

- Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

Week Seven/October 23.

- Latour, Cont'd.

- Skloot, *The Immortal Life...*

Week Eight/October 30.

- Proposals for Seminar Papers Due; Discussed in class

- Skloot, cont'd.

- Foucault, fr. *History of Sexuality, v.1; Society Must Be Defended*. "Lecture of March 17, 1976"

Week Nine/November 6.

- Association for Molecular Pathology, et al v. Myriad Genetics

- Holloway, especially chapters 1, 3, 4

Week Ten/November 13.

- Research Presentations I
Week Eleven/November 20.

- Research Presentations II

Week Twelve/November 27: Class cancelled. Individual paper conferences will be scheduled instead.

Week Thirteen/ December 4: Last class

- Research Presentations III

Week Fourteen: Final Papers due.