Literary and Cultural Theory: An Interdisciplinary Introduction

IDSEM 1314 Fall 2014
Monday-Wednesday 12:30-1:45
194 Mercer, Room 203

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

“It now seems widely accepted that any intellectual project has a basis in theory of some sort…and that theory, far from being ‘too difficult’ for undergraduates, is the sort of thing they ought to explore as one of the most exciting and socially pertinent dimensions of the humanities.”

--Jonathan Culler

“There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.”

--Michel Foucault

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?

**Learning Goals:** 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:**


Foucault, M., *The History of Sexuality, v. 1*

Ranciere, *The Politics of the Aesthetic*

Adorno, *The Culture Industry*

All other reading on NYU Classes Site

**General Requirements:**

- Attendance and participation are REQUIRED. More than three unexcused absences will affect your grade negatively. More than five can cause you to fail. Absences for the observance of religious holidays are not included in this policy; please do alert me, however, if you must miss class for religious observance.

- 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.
**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 deepening your understanding. This is especially the case where the reading is abstract and difficult, as ours will often be this semester. You’ll be required to write weekly responses to reading, which you will bring to class to share and to help you contribute to discussion. 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 "read along" with a challenging theoretical text, creating a 'map' of the thinker's moves. The fourth essay asks you to take up two theorists and examine the differences and similarities in their approach.

**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](http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html) for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

**Grading Policy:** I am generally skeptical of specific percentage break-outs for assignments. I have found that in the humanities, it is difficult to make such break-outs with any mathematical accuracy. The reason for this is that assignments build on each other, develop into each other, such that if you are doing all the work for the course [preparing, doing short writing in a timely manner, participating in discussion, doing formal paper assignments with care and seriousness], each element will strengthen your overall work. Furthermore, percentage break-outs tend to suggest, however occultly, that there are some assignments you can 'skip,' or pay less attention to, and others that should get the bulk of your attention. This course does not work that way. Nonetheless, you can think of it like this:

- Attendance is a degree zero. If you aren't here, you can't perform. You get no credit for being here; you lose credit if you are not.
- Preparedness, participation, and short writing constitute about ten per cent of your grade.
- The first three papers mount up to about 20 per cent each.
- The final paper constitutes about 30 per cent.
Class Schedule

note bene: This schedule is somewhat flexible, depending on class interests, etc.

September 3: Introductions
Speculating...on literature and other things

September 8: The force of form
• Ryan, Chapter 1, 1-26; Barry, "Approaching Theory," 4-10
• Eichenbaum, "The formal method"
• Shklovsky, "Art as Technique"
• Assorted poems and images

September 10: The Logic of Signs: Structuralism
• Barry, on structuralism, pages 39-60
• Saussure, fr. A Course in General Linguistics, 59-75

September 15:
• Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth"

September 17:
• Balzac, Sarrasine

September 24: Barthes and Balzac, continued.

September 29: Analyze THAT! Psychoanalysis and its Vicissitudes.
• Freud, fr. The Interpretation of Dreams
  Barry on psychoanalysis, 96-119
• First paper due.

October 1:
• Freud, "The Uncanny"
• Hoffman, "The Sandman"

October 6:
• Hitchcock, "Strangers on a Train"

October 8:
• Lacan, "The Mirror Stage"

October 13: Fall break.
October 15: By the book: Post-Structuralism
• Barry, on post-structuralism, 61-79
• Nietzsche, "On truth and lying in the extra moral sense"

October 20:
• Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context"
• second paper due
October 22:
• Derrida, "Differance"

October 27:
• Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, v. 1*, pages 1-16
October 29:
• Foucault, *HS*, 17-35

November 3:
• Foucault, *HS*, 51-74

November 5:
• TBA

November 10: **Politics and/or Culture**
• Marx, *The German Ideology*
• Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" *
• third paper due.

November 12:
• Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"
• Fiske, "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation"

November 17:
• Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility"

November 19:
• Benjamin, Cont'd.

November 24:
• Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry as Mass Deception"

November 26: TBA

December 1
• Adorno, "On the Fetish Character of Music;" "Free Time"

• Jameson, "Reification and Utopia," Ngai, "The Zany Science"

December 3
• Ranciere, "The Distribution of the Sensible"

December 8
• Ranciere, "The Distribution of the Sensible," cont'd.

December 10
• Final Class. Wrap-up. Last paper due.