Gender Undone: Fiction, Film, and Feminist Theory

NYU—Gallatin School
IDSEM-UG 1731
Fall 2014
24 Waverly Place Rm 370
Thursday 3:30-6:10

Instructor: Rose-Ellen Lessy
rel9@nyu.edu
Office: 1 Washington Pl., Room 604
Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00-4:00 and by appt

Course Description:

Is gender something one has or something one does? What does it mean to “do” a feminist reading of a text or a film? How might feminist theory endeavor to both describe and undo cultural constructions of gender? This course will explore these questions by reading a range of theoretical and literary texts that elaborate historical, medical, psychoanalytic, and cultural models of gender and sexuality. We will read critics and theorists who have become central to contemporary feminism, including Freud, Mulvey, Butler, and Fausto-Sterling, among others. We will pay particular attention to literary texts that have been productive for feminist formulations of gender, including work by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Nella Larsen, and Angela Carter. Finally, we will screen several films that invite viewers to reform or rethink their own perceptions of gender, including Safe, and Boys Don’t Cry. Topics we will discuss include: norms, the psychosomatic, the gaze, transgender theory, and performativity.

Learning Outcomes

In this course you will:

1. Further develop your critical thinking and writing skills
2. Become acquainted with different feminist models of sex and gender
3. Become comfortable with the process of developing nuanced critical arguments about literary and filmic representations of sex and gender

Required Texts: (available at NYU Bookstore.):

5. Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis

Films:

Safe, Todd Haynes, 1995
Paris is Burning, Jennie Livingston, 1990
Rear Window, Alfred Hitchcock, 1954
Boys Don’t Cry, Kimberly Pierce 1999

Reading/Viewing Policy:
I expect readings to be completed (and films to be screened) by the day they are listed on the syllabus. A number of the reading assignments are posted on Classes. In order to save you money, I have not required you to purchase books when we are reading only excerpts or single essays/chapters. However, you **MUST** print out your own copy of each text and bring it to class the day of discussion. If you do not have a copy of the text in front of you, I will assume you haven’t done the assignment. It isn’t possible for you to fully discuss a text when you don’t have your own copy. I will periodically add an additional essay or excerpt to your reading list that has not been previously announced.

**Weekly analytic written response:**

Every week (except when a paper is due), you are required to submit a one-page analytic response to one of the assigned readings and/or films. Your paragraph should make a concise, thoughtful point about an issue, concept, or idea in one or more of the readings for the week. Please submit this response via email (rel9@nyu.edu) with the subject line “Weekly Response” by 10:00 am Thursday morning. These responses will not be individually graded, but they will count towards your participation grade.

**Assignments/Grading Structure**

**Ongoing:** Attendance, participation, response papers (30%)  
**Week 7:** Essay 2 (6-8 pages) (30%)  
**Week 15:** Essay 2 (7-10 pages) (40%)

**Late assignments and Incompletes:**

Assignments are due at the beginning of class time on the days listed below. Extensions will not be granted unless special circumstances merit prior approval. Failing to submit an assignment on or before the due date will result in a lower grade.

Incompletes for the semester cannot be taken except in extraordinary circumstances and with my prior approval.

**Attendance and Punctuality:**

*Absences-*  
Attendance is required. I don’t distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, but more than two absences may result in the lowering of your grade by one full letter. If you have an ongoing difficulty that may result in missing multiple classes, please speak to me immediately so we can discuss your options.

*Punctuality-*  
It is disruptive to the class if people are wandering in throughout the period. Therefore, if you are more than ten minutes late to class, I will count it as ½ an absence.

*Breaks/Leaving During Class-*  
It is also disruptive if people are wandering in and out of class during discussion. We will always take a break midway through class (that is, 70 minutes in.) In the majority of cases, I ask that you wait until the break to leave class. If you have a medical issue that might require more frequent break-taking, please inform me of the situation.

**Grading:**
While the grades you receive on papers will figure most prominently in the determination of your final grade (80%), the following factors will also matter:

- Class attendance: absences will hurt your grade.
- Class participation: being present in body alone is insufficient to merit the term participation. You need to contribute in productive and visible ways.
- Class preparation: presence, even highly vocal presence, is not particularly helpful if you have not done the required reading. Please come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings and screening.

Paper Formatting:

- All papers must be typed, double-spaced, page-numbered, and stapled or paper-clipped. Papers lacking these features will not be accepted.
- No funny business with fonts and margins. Please use one-inch margins and standard fonts in eleven- or twelve-point.
- Always choose a title, but skip the title page. Place all information (name, date, course, assignment) in the upper right-hand corner of your first page.
- Please use MLA citation format

Conferences:

I will have weekly office hours; it usually works best if you make an appointment to meet me with me during my office hours, in order to avoid waiting. If you are unable to attend office hours but would like to meet, please speak to me about setting up an alternative time.

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.

Plagiarism, or academic theft, is claiming someone else’s work as your own. Please consult me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism. To avoid even the appearance of plagiarism, please make sure to cite every source you cite—this includes every online source. Please consult a guide like A Writer’s Reference for guidelines on the documentation of online sources.

Cell Phone/Laptop Policy:

Of course, you must turn off cellular phones before coming to class. If you bring a laptop, please do not turn it on or use it during class time. (I may make exceptions for viewing course readings on laptops, depending on the week.)

Disabilities Policy:
New York University is committed to providing equal educational opportunity and participation for students with disabilities. It is the University’s policy that no qualified student with a disability be excluded from participating in any University program or activity, denied the benefits of any University program or activity, or otherwise subjected to discrimination with regard to any University program or activity. The Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) determines qualified disability status and assists students in obtaining appropriate accommodations and services. Please contact the CSD at 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor (Phone: 212-998-4980; Email: mosesesd@nyu.edu) if you have any questions.

Schedule:

**Part I: What is gender? What are women?**

**Week 1**
September 4:
Introduction
Angela Carter “The Werewolf”
* Diagnostic essay (0%)

**Week 2**
September 11: What is gender?
1. Simone de Beauvoir from *The Second Sex* (FLTC 299-323)
2. Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” (FirstClasses);
3. Monique Wittig from One is Not Born a Woman (FLTC 545-551)

**Week 3**
September 18: What are women?
1. Sherry Ortner “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” (FLTC 350-367),
2. Denise Riley from *Am I That Name?* (Classes)
3. Chandra Mohanty (FLTC 824-833)

**Part II: Feminist reading, Feminist Writing**

**Week 4**
September 25: What is a feminist reading?
1. Judith Fetterly, (FLTC 443-448)
2. Barbara Johnson “Introduction” to *The Feminist Difference* (Classes)
4. Gayatri Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (FLTC 900-904)

**Week 5**
October 2: What is feminist writing?
1. Audre Lorde (selections in FLTC 222-228)
2. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*

**Part III: The Symptom**

**Week 6**
October 9: Reading the symptom
2. Barbara Johnson “Is Female to Male as ground is to Figure?”
3. Excerpts from Elaine Showalter, *A Female Malady* (Classes)
Week 7
October 16:
1. *Safe* (Watch prior to today’s class meeting)
2. *Read Freud* “On Femininity” (Classes)

**Essay #1 Due**

Part IV: Performing Gender

Week 8
October 23: What is gender again (and again)?
1. Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (FLTC 708-723);
2. Butler, from *Bodies that Matter* (Classes);
3. *Paris is Burning* (Watch prior to today’s class meeting)

Week 9
October 30:
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1-83) select historical texts (107-108, 124-126) and critical essays by Carla Kaplan (ix-xxvii) Deborah McDowell (363-379) Jennifer Brody (393-309) and Miriam Thaggert (507-530)

Week 10
November 6:
1. Laura Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
2. Discuss *Rear Window* in class
3. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright from *Practices of Looking* (Classes)
4. Tania Modleski “The Master’s Dollhouse: Rear Window” (Classes)
5. bell hooks “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” (Classes)

Week 11
November 13:
1. *Boys Don’t Cry* (Watch prior to today’s class meeting)
2. Judith Halberstam “The Transgender Look” (Classes)
3. Judith Butler, from “Undiagnosing Gender” *Undoing Gender* (Classes)

IV. Rethinking embodiment

Week 12
November 20: Questioning sex/gender –
1. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Seeing the Body* 1-114 and 170-195 (text)
2. Judith Butler, “Doing Justice to Someone” from *Undoing Gender* (Classes)

November 27: THANKSGIVING

Week 13
December 4: Conferences *Draft of first 2 pages of Essay #2 due*

Week 14
December 11: Conclusions. **Essay #2 due.**