Introduction

Burdened by a world that is “too much with us,” modern art has had to “make it new” by making it strange — to render the familiar unfamiliar. Through close reading and analytic writing, this class will examine and compare several strategies of estrangement. To represent the everyday as though for the first time is to rescue daily life from the oblivion of habit—in Viktor Shklovsky’s words, “to return sensation to our limbs, to make a stone feel stony.” Estrangement restores difference to a world of universal sameness. In the hands of Bertolt Brecht, estrangement became a means of awakening us from the fictions of our bourgeois existence. To achieve this effect on stage, Brecht invented an Epic Theater that interrupted its own theatrical illusion. As Shklovsky and Brecht were estranging the familiar, Freud was theorizing why the familiar so often already felt strange, frightening, “uncanny.” Psychoanalysis shows us our own selves as strangers. Students will write essays that place these theories in dialogue with each other, use them to interpret the art and culture of their own time, and construct arguments that draw on scholarly sources. The culminating research paper will examine an artistic practice in any medium in the light of estrangement, engaging particular artworks as well as contemporary scholarship.

Course Objectives

- To engage with concepts of estrangement, demystification, and the uncanny by closely reading and making connections between texts in aesthetic, cultural, and psychoanalytic theory
- To make use of these theoretical texts in the interpretation of mass-produced images, literary texts, and films
To formulate aesthetic and political questions about the relationship between the familiar and the strange and to respond to them with arguments that draw on a variety of both primary and secondary sources, discovered through individual and group research.

Writing

Over the course of the semester, you will write three essays.

1) The *exhibit-based essay* (3-5 pages) will examine a literary text or a visual artwork that makes use of any of the strategies of *estrangement* that Viktor Shklovsky discusses in “Art as Device” or “Parallels in Tolstoy.” The text or artwork will be your *exhibit*. You will need to explain what in the exhibit is the *object* or *target* of estrangement, what is being estranged; this could be a thing or an experience, an event or a ritual, as well as a literary or artistic convention (such as a genre, a familiar metaphor or image, a rhetorical or linguistic rule or a system of representation). You will also need to explain the *device* (or strategy) that the exhibit uses to perform its work of estrangement, *how* it estranges its object.

The technique you will be practicing in this essay is *close reading*. Close reading derives the meaning of an exhibit (verbal or visual) through minute attention to particulars, cropping out (by describing or quoting) small areas of the exhibit in order to examine them in detail and then explaining their relation to the whole from which they were taken. To interpret the exhibit as whole is to make an argument about the relation between its meaning and its structure, between *what* the exhibit is showing or saying and *how* it’s showing or saying it. Close reading will be a skill (an art, really) I will expect you to demonstrate for the rest of the semester, and which all of the other essays will require.

2) The *method-based essay* (3-5 pages) involves two elements: a *theoretical model or concept* and an *exhibit* that the model could help to explain. You will need to *present an idea* from one of our theoretical texts and *apply it* to an image of your own choosing. An applied concept is a *method*.

For this essay, I will ask you to choose and *closely and critically* examine a familiar mass-produced image. This image could come from the realms of advertising, popular culture (film, television, music), or even “high” culture, so long as it has been mechanically or digitally reproduced and widely distributed. This image will be your *exhibit*. Your task will be to *defamiliarize*, or *estrange*, this all-too-familiar image, to make it appear to your reader as though for the first time. To do this, you will need to (1) decompose the image into its significant elements and (2) explain how these elements come together to produce the meaning of the image, the message it transmits. This message may be unstated and hidden in plain sight, concealed by the obviousness or seeming naturalness of the image. It is your job to reveal this message by decoding the signs of which the image is made.
One model for this essay is Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*: a series of short texts that scrutinize the commodified objects and images that make up our mass-mediated everyday environment to reveal their ideological connotations.

(3) The research essay (8-10 pages) will make use of all the techniques from the first two essays: close reading, presentation and application of concepts (method use), and interpretation. It will add one more: engagement with prior scholarship on your topic (known as secondary sources). While you work on this essay, we will be spending several classes on the objectives and methods of academic research: finding scholarly writing on your topic, locating the central questions underlying various arguments, and formulating your own argument in relation to – as different from while not necessarily opposed to – those of earlier critics. You will form small groups based on common research interests and together compile (and post online) an annotated bibliography of scholarly sources on a particular topic. Your group will then present your topic to the class by closely reading relevant exhibits, explaining illuminating concepts, and raising controversial questions discussed in the scholarship on your topic.

You will be writing drafts for all three essays – at least one for each. I will read and comment on the drafts, and we will workshop them in class, either as a whole class or in small groups. These workshops will be a key part of the course, so please plan on having drafts done on time and ready to be workshoped. Please, also, be ready to share your work on other occasions as well; throughout the semester, I will be asking you to read your writing aloud in class or circulate it in small, informal groups.

In addition to the essays, I will also ask you to do two other types of writing, which will provide starting points for our class discussions and group work and generate ideas for your essays:

(1) *The Journal of Questions*: Over the course of the semester, you will be keeping a journal of the questions that arise from your reading and our class discussions. For each of our texts, after you have read it and before we have discussed it, formulate three questions and, for each question, take some notes on what you would need to answer it — which passages of the text you would consider more closely, what background information you would need, which ideas or concepts you would need to research. I will collect your journals two or three times during the semester (I won’t grade them, but will simply check that you are keeping them up). Please bring your journals with you to every class — you will be using your questions during group work and discussion, and I will occasionally ask you to write in them during class.

(2) *Reading Responses*: Each of you will need to write a total of six reading responses (about 2 pages each): three original ones and three secondary responses to the responses of your classmates. All this responding will take place online, on our NYU Classes site. Under “Forums,” I will create “Topics” for each of our
readings, and you will post your original responses as “Threads” and your secondary responses as “Replies” to the threads of your classmates. Like the journals, these will not be officially graded, but I will be keeping track of their quality and consistency. Since these, too, are meant to facilitate our conversations and to provide you with material for your essays, it is very important that you spread them out evenly over the semester and not leave them for the last few weeks of class. Try, also, to do them in plenty of time before each class so that you have time to process the reading and formulate your thoughts. Part of your reading assignment for each class will be to read the responses posted for that day, so please post them as early as possible to give all of us time to read them before we meet. These are meant to be provisional writing, rather than polished and unassailable arguments. They are the place to try out ideas, ask questions, venture arguments — to be tentative, confused, ambivalent.

On most weeks, I will also assign one or two writing exercises, to be done at home, in preparation for discussions, essay drafting, and workshops. These will be part of your Journal of Questions, but you will always have the option to turn them into reading responses and post them to NYU Classes.

Readings

Our texts will range in genre, discipline, and length: poetry in prose and verse, fiction and criticism, narrative and drama, aesthetic, cultural, and psychological theory, and several hybrid texts that cross all these divides. Some will theorize strategies of estrangement, others will practice them, and many will do both. In addition to the required readings, I encourage you to follow up whatever topics, texts, or authors particularly interest you. You could do this by looking up background information, searching for criticism, or getting further reading recommendations from me or your classmates. You will, in fact, need to do all of this for your research essay.

Grading

I will base your grades on the quality of your essays, your group research presentation, and your class participation. Participation includes the timely completion of your journal questions, responses, and essay drafts as well as, of course, your vocal participation in discussions and group work. It also includes responding (both orally and in writing) to the work of others during workshops. Each draft of your essay matters (though it will not get a separate grade). Presentation (i.e. grammar, proof-reading, MLA format) as well as style and substance counts.

Anticipated breakdown of final grade:

Exhibit-based essay: 20%
Method-based essay: 25%
Research essay: 25%
Group presentation/annotated bibliography: 15%
Participation (including completion of journal and responses): 15%

Attendance

If, due to illness, emergency, or religious holiday, you cannot attend class, please be in touch with me directly as soon as possible so that you can be prepared for the next class. You will also need to get the notes for the day you missed from one of your classmates; once you have gotten the notes, I will be happy to meet with you and go over what you missed. Please be aware that more than two unexcused absences will jeopardize your course grade.

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 Texts

You can buy our books at the NYU Bookstore. All other texts will be on our NYU Classes site, under “Resources,” in either of two folders: “Required Readings” or “Optional Readings.”


Syllabus

I. Exhibits:
   Familiar Things

Week 1

Tue, Jan 28
- Introduction
- In-class viewing: from The Phantom of Liberty (Le Fantôme de la Liberté), dir. Luis Buñuel (1974)
- In-class writing: noticing
- Discussion: seeing the familiar

Thu, Jan 30
- Reading: Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device” (1917)
- Discussion: strategies of estrangement

Week 2

Tue, Feb 4; Thu, Feb 6
- Reading: Shklovsky, “Parallels in Tolstoy” (1923)
- Discussion: the revolt of things
- Writing exercise/group work: acts of estrangement

Week 3

Tue, Feb 11; Thu, Feb 13
- Reading: Virginia Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall” (1917)
- Discussion: attention and distraction
- Group work: acts of estrangement (continued)
- Draft of exhibit-based essay due (Thu)
- Workshop

Week 4

Tue, Feb 18; Thu, Feb 20
- Reading: Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons (1914); “Composition as Explanation” (1925)
- Writing exercise/discussion: describing description
- Discussion: what is a composition?

Week 5

Tue, Feb 25; Thu, Feb 27
- Reading: Roland Barthes, Mythologies (1957) (selected essays)
- Writing exercise: theory: explaining a method (semiology/“semioclastm”)
- Discussion: what is a myth?
- Exhibit-based essay due (Thu)

II.  Methods:
Interrupting the World

Week 6

Tue, Mar 4; Thu, Mar 6
- Reading: Mythologies (continued)
- Writing exercise: *practice: using a method*
- Group work: myths today

**Week 7**

Tue, Mar 11; Thu, Mar 13
- Reading: *Brecht on Theater* (selected essays)
- Discussion: acting methods
- Draft of method-based essay due (Thu)
- Workshop

**Week 8**

Tue, Mar 18; Thu, Mar 20: *Spring Break*

**Week 9**

Tue, Mar 25; Thu, Mar 27
- Reading: Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (1945-47)
- Writing exercise: notes for a performance
- Group work/discussion: performing a scene

**Week 10**

Tue, Apr 1; Thu, Apr 3
- Optional reading: Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” (1973)
- Writing exercise: elements of epic theater
- Discussion: political theater, theatrical politics
- Method-based essay due (Thu)

**Week 11**

Tue, Apr 8; Thu, Apr 10
- Film: *La Chinoise*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (1967) (screening TBD)
- Writing exercise: word and image
- Discussion: theory and practice: fighting on two fronts
- Writing exercise/discussion: research questions and topics

**III. Sites/Sights: Remembering the Self**

**Week 12**

Tue, Apr 15; Thu, Apr 17
- Reading: Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919); Julia Kristeva, from Strangers to Ourselves (1991)
- Writing exercise: sites of the uncanny
- Discussion: familiar strangeness

**Week 13**

Tue, Apr 22; Thu, Apr 24
- Reading: William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1799)
- Writing exercise/discussion: spots of time

**Week 14**

Tue, Apr 29; Thu, May 1
- Group presentations
- Annotated bibliographies due (on NYU Classes)

**Week 15**

Tue, May 6; Thu, May 8
- Group presentations
- Draft of research essay due (Tue)
- Workshop

**Mon, May 19: Research essay due** (by email as a Word document or pdf)