Literary and Cultural Theory: An Interdisciplinary Introduction

Spring 2014

K20.1314/ Monday-Wednesday 12:30-1:45/Silver 404

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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?

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:

Rivkin and Ryan, Literary Theory: An Anthology

Barry, P., Beginning Theory

Other materials marked *, available via NYU Classes; see "Resources" folder

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.

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. 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] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.
Class Schedule

note bene: asterisked items will be on the 'Classes' site. This schedule is somewhat flexible, depending on class interests, etc.

January 27: Introductions
Speculating...on literature and other things

January 29: The force of form
- Ryan, Chapter 1
- Eichenbaum, “The formal method”
- Shklovsky, "Art as Technique;"
- Assorted poems

February 3: Signs of the Times: Structuralism
- Barry, on structuralism
- Saussure, fr. A Course in General Linguistics

February 5:
- Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth"
- Mukarovsky, "Art as Semiotic Fact"*

February 10:
- Balzac, Sarrasine*
- Barthes, fr. S/Z*

February 12: Barthes/Balzac, cont’d.

February 17: Presidents’ Day. No class.

February 19: Analyze THAT! Psychoanalysis and its Vicissitudes.
- Freud, fr. The Interpretation of Dreams
- Rivkin and Ryan, 389-395; Barry on psychoanalysis.
- First paper due.

February 24:
- Freud, "The Uncanny"

February 26:
- Freud, "Fetishism," from Three Essays*
- David Lynch, Blue Velvet [film]

March 3:
- Lacan, "The Mirror Stage"

March 5: By the book: Post-Structuralism
- Rivkin and Ryan, 'Introductory Deconstruction’
- Barry, on post-structuralism
- Nietzsche, ‘On truth and lying in the extra moral sense’
March 10:
- Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context"
March 12: Derrida, "Differance"
- second paper due.

March 17-19: spring break.

March 24:
- Foucault, fr. *The Archaeology of knowledge*

March 26:
- Foucault, fr. *Discipline and Punish*

March 31:
- Deleuze and Guattari, fr. *A Thousand Plateaux*

April 2:
- Deleuze and Guattari, cont’d.

April 7: **Politics and/of Culture**
- Marx, *The German Ideology* [excerpts]
- Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" *
- third paper due.

April 9:
- Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" *
- Fiske, "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation"

April 14:
- Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility"

April 16:
- Benjamin, Cont’d.

April 21:
- Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry as Mass Deception"
- Adorno, "On the Fetish Character of Music; "Free Time"*

April 23:
- Adorno and Horkheimer, cont’d.

April 28
- Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia"*

April 30
- Zizek, "The Sublime Object of Ideology"*

May 5
- Ranciere, "The Distribution of the Sensible"*

May 7
- Ranciere, etc, cont’d.

May 12
- Last class. Wrap up. Final Papers Due.