

# Literary and Cultural Theory: An Interdisciplinary Introduction

IDSEM 1314 Fall 2015

Monday-Wednesday 11-12:15

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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

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**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?

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**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:**

Lane, Richard, ed. *Global Literary Theory: An anthology* Routledge, 2013.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*

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 will cause you to fail the course. 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.
- Electronic devices are permitted in this course only in so far as their use is related to our class work: note-taking, consulting readings that may be on-line or saved as documents, etc. *Do not shop or using social media during class time.*

**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; these responses will have a particular format. Please see Appendix to this syllabus. 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 15 per cent of your grade.
- The first three papers mount up to about 20 per cent each.
- The final paper constitutes about 25 per cent.

## Class Schedule

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

### September 2 : **Introductions**

Speculating...on literature and other things

### September 7: **The force of form**

- Culler, 1-42; Ryan, "Formalism," [Classes Site]
- Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," Lane, 7-20.
- Eichbaum, "The Formal Method" [Classes Site]
- Poems and images

### September 9 : **The Logic of Signs: Structuralism**

- Saussure, "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," Lane, 39-43
- Jakobson, "Two Types of Language...", Lane, 44-52.

September 14:

- Kristeva, "The Semiotic Activity," Lane, 60-72.
- Barthes, *Mythologies*: "The Romans In Film," ; "Garbo's Face," ; "The Great Family of Man," ; "Wine and Milk," [Classes Site]

September 16:

- Barthes, "Myth Today," Lane, 53-59; Azoulay, "The Family of Man: A Visual Universal Declaration of Human Rights," [Classes].

September 21: Azoulay, "The Family of Man: A Visual Universal Declaration of Human Rights," [Classes]

September 23: Discussion of first paper.

### September 28: **Analyze THAT! Psychoanalysis and its Vicissitudes.**

- Freud, "The Dreamwork," Lane, 245-253.

- First paper due.

September 30:

- Freud, "The Uncanny," Lane, 254-268.
- Hoffman, "The Sandman" [Classes]

October 5:

- Hanneke, "Caché" ["Hidden"]

October 7:

- Lacan, "The Mirror Stage;" Felman, "Jacques Lacan: Madness and the Risks of Theory," Lane, 268-280
- Continued discussion of "Hidden"

October 12: Fall Recess

October 13: [Legislative Day: Monday schedule on a Tuesday]

- Psychoanalysis Discussion continued. Discussion of Second Paper.

### October 14 : **By the book: Post-Structuralism**

- Culler, 56-69. Lane, 73-81.
- Nietzsche, "On truth and lying in the extra moral sense" [classes]

October 19:

- Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" in Lane, 94-106.
- second paper due

October 21:

- Derrida, cont'd.

October 26:

- Aluwalia, "Derrida," in Lane, 81-93;
- Poovey, "Feminism and Deconstruction," 107-116, in Lane.

October 28:

- Discussion of Papers.

November 2: **Politics and/of Culture From the Nineteenth Century to the Post-colonial Era**

- Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," [classes]; "The Commodity," 319-328, Lane.

November 4:

- Marx, cont'd.
- Third Paper Due.

November 9:

- Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry...", Lane 329-336.

November 11:

- Jameson, "Mass Culture as Big Business," Lane, 337-342.
- Gallagher and Greenblatt, "The Potato in the Materialist Imagination," Lane, 360-376.

November 16:

- Said, "Orientalism Now," Lane, 530-539
- And "Orientalism" then: readings and images, TBA.

November 18:

- Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and The English Language," Lane, 547-553; *Things Fall Apart*, excerpts (Classes).
- Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Lane, 540-546.

November 23:

- Spivak, "Can The Subaltern Speak?" Lane, 521-529.

November 25-27: Thanksgiving Break

November 30: **Identifications, Local and Global**

- Foucault, "Scientia Sexualis," Lane, 592-600.

December 2:

- Butler, "From Interiority to Gender Performatives," Lane, 581-586.
- Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet," Lane, 601-610.

December 7

TBA.

Final Papers Discussion.

December 9

Gupta, "Literary Studies and Globalization, " Lane, 867-875

Brennan, "From Development to Globalization: Post-Colonial Studies and Globalization Theory," Lane, 876-888.

Xie, "Is the World Decentred?" Lane, 888-901

Walkowitz, "The Location of Literature," 918-928.

December 14: Last class. Final Papers due.

## Appendix

### Guidelines for Short Writing

Every week, you will submit a short piece of informal writing concerned with one of our readings for that week. This piece of work will usually be due on Monday, but sometimes, depending on the schedule, it will be due on Wednesday. Because these assignments are designed to help you become a closer, more careful reader, they should be prepared prior to the class session when they are due. You may submit them prior to class in electronic form, either in the body of an email or in a Word Document. **Do not use pdfs.** You should also bring a copy to class.

These should be about two to three pages long. They are informal. They are questioning; do not fret about being right or having the correct answer or reading or being dazzling brilliant. This is writing to figure things out, not writing to establish the final word.

These short writings constitute, more or less, a reader's journal--or the groundwork for one. *Under no circumstances should you simply save them up and hand them in at the end of the term.* They will not be accepted at that point. They will only be accepted in the week that they are due. They are entered as part of your grade on a pass/fail basis: you do it, you pass; you don't do it, you fail.

Each one should follow a specific format. Here is that format.

1. From one of the week's readings, select a quote. You can pick it because you like it, because it confuses you, because it fascinates you, because you feel there is something to say about it and you want to figure out what that something is. Reproduce that quote at the beginning of your writing. Provide page numbers.
2. Explain where the quotation comes in the piece. Where does it come in the argument? What do you think your selected passage is doing? Is it introducing an idea? Is it instantiating a particular claim? Is it making a claim?
3. Now gloss, or discuss, this quote. Try to put it in your own words. What does it mean? How does it fit into the broader argument or arguments in the essay?
4. What questions does it provoke for you? What connections might you want to make, to other readings from this class, to readings you have done elsewhere, to other objects, examples, artifacts?



