PROSEMINAR: INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITICAL THEORY IN PRACTICE

NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study, MA Program
Spring 2016 - CORE-GG2018.001 – Mondays, 6:20 – 9:00 – 1 Wash Pl 527

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Office hours: I'm generally around Tuesdays 2 – 6, but please make an appointment (other days and times are available)

Course description and objectives:

Historical and technological developments have changed ideas about cultural consumption. Is the mass audience itself a product of the goods and entertainment it consumes (as midcentury ideology theorists believed) or is it an outmoded concept lost in the wake of globalization, the sharp focusing techniques of digital marketing, crowd sourcing, and participatory culture? What are the implications of these developments for aesthetic appreciation, the formation of pleasure and desire, the relationship between culture and politics? Where do you stand as a critic, scholar, or artist in relation to such questions? This proseminar attempts to reach students with interests, practical or theoretical, in one or more of the following fields: media studies, literary and art criticism, history, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and philosophy (particularly aesthetics). Among the topics to be discussed are: the history of asserted differences between high and low art; the mass reproduction and commodification of art; critical judgment and the differences between fans and experts.

This class provides an interdisciplinary survey of major recurring questions, approaches and modes of inquiry, and current trends in academic and artistic
research. Whether considering philosophy, religion, literature, visual art, or any of the other branches of the arts and humanities singly or in combination, we are always concerned in this class with human symbolic expression and its transmission and theories devised to approach questions about that expression. Thus, we will inevitably cross disciplinary borders and engage with questions and methods employed within social science fields as well. Much of what we do here, however, is in line with the idea of “humanistic study” in which

research is approached differently than in the natural and social sciences, where data and hard evidence are required to draw conclusions. Because the human experience cannot be adequately captured by facts and figures alone, humanities research employs methods that are historical, interpretive and analytical in nature.

Professors who engage in humanities research are often posing questions about common assumptions, uncovering new meanings in artistic works, or finding new ways to understand cultural interactions. This type of inquiry can produce clearer pictures of the past, uncover the many insights that we can draw from our forbears, and in turn, help us better to prepare for the future. (http://shc.stanford.edu/how-humanities-research-conducted)

Moving generally from big questions (what is “culture,” anyway?) through general humanistic approaches (formal analysis, taxonomy, content analysis), this class concludes by focusing on a number of issues and intellectual turns that feature prominently in contemporary American intellectual and artistic life. Organizing the latter stage of the class is an investigation into the critique and interpretation of images, memes, and signs.

It is hoped that students will collaborate with the instructor to revise the syllabus as we go along to accommodate the particular interests of the group. The syllabus is somewhat provisional—and especially so after the middle of the semester. With some regret, it must be admitted that most of our focus will fall upon works and theories originating in the West. This issue will itself receive some attention in our class discussions, although most often through reading Western writers writing critically about Western attitudes to the non-West. Interested students, however, will have opportunity to submit work that incorporates a more comprehensive global reach.

Readings:

Most readings are essays and book chapters and will be distributed via our NYU Classes site. You must obtain the following books yourself:

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*
Assignments / Grades

Your final grade is based on your class participation, 2 -3 in-class presentations, and writing assignments.

Syllabus

January 25  First class

February 1  Culture, Community, Individual

Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?"
Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment”?  
Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

February 8  Matthew Arnold, from Culture and Anarchy
Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System”
John Fiske, “Popular Culture”
Simon Frith, “The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Saving Popular Culture from the Populists”

Writing exercise: 250-500 word response to Joshua Rothman’s “The Meaning of ‘Culture’” (focus on any aspect that grabs your interest, but if you can relate your argument to your concentration that would be great). Paper due by 5 p.m. on day of class.

February 15  Presidents' Day (no class)

February 22

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents
F. R. Leavis, from Mass Civilization and Minority Culture
Newton Minnow, “Television and the Public Interest”
Dwight Macdonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture”
Louis Menand, “Browbeaten”

February 29  Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume I

March 7  Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”
James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”
Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color”

**Writing exercise:** 500 – 750 words. Analyze/discuss Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case” and/or “A Wagner Afternoon” in relation to any of the authors we encountered in the first half of the semester. Paper due by 5 p.m. on day of class.

March 14  SPRING BREAK

March 21  Social Structure and Culture

  Georg Simmel, “Fashion”  
  Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*  
  Russell Lynes, from *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste*  

March 28  Audiences

  Carl Wilson, *Let’s Talk about Love*  
  Stuart Hall, Selected essays, including “Coding/Decoding”  
  Janice Radway, from *Reading the Romance*  
  Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp”  
  Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents”

**Midterm paper:** 2,500 words (on topic to be developed)

April 4  Interpretation / Stereotypes and Signs

  Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”  
  George Orwell, “Boys Weeklies”  
  Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

April 11  Narrative and Ideology

  Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”  
  Drew Westin, “What Happened to Obama?”  
  Terry Eagleton, “Ideology, Fiction, Narrative”  
  Selections from Marx, Althusser, and Jameson  
  Lauren Berlant, *Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)*
April 18 Memes

Henry Jenkins, from *Convergence Culture*
Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture
Henry Jenkins, interview with Shifman
Henry Jenkins, from *Spreadable Media*

April 25 Images: Production and Circulation

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction”
Hito Steyerl, “*In Defense of the Poor Image*” and “*Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?*”
Winnie Woo, *Van Gogh on Demand*

May 2 Student Presentations

May 9 Student Presentations

*Final paper: 15 – 20 pages, topic to be determined by student’s interest*