Introduction

“The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future too.”
~Mary Tyrone in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*

The past is... An enabling tradition? A stifling burden? A repetition compulsion? A revolutionary imperative? Each of these by turns or all at once, the idea of the past figures centrally in the work of thinkers across disciplines and mediums: philosophers and psychologists, historians and social theorists, poets, painters, and filmmakers. This proseminar, aimed at the needs and interests of students embarking upon the Gallatin MA, offers an introduction to a series of influential theories and methods in the humanities and social sciences by exploring and comparing their conceptions of the past and its effects on the present and the future. The past is an unquiet ghost haunting theoretical texts as well as the literary and visual artworks they illuminate and that have inspired them. With the presence of the past as our guiding thread, we will read and closely analyze classic and modern texts (in fields ranging from philosophy and cultural theory to literature, painting, and film, to anthropology, sociology, and historiography); map major theoretical and political positions within these texts and artworks; develop a shared critical vocabulary; and formulate the urgent and intractable questions that motivate these texts and provoke our responses to them. Our texts may include essays and books by Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Simmel, Woolf, Stein, Du Bois, Benjamin, Foucault, Boym, Huysssen, and Morrison. Students will play a major role in navigating our readings, steering our discussions, and choosing the topics we address. In addition to writing short responses and a midterm paper, students will conduct a critical research project on a relevant topic of their own choosing that will culminate in a 15-20 page final paper.

**Course Objectives**
To explore the cultural and political stakes of the past’s hold over the present by formulating a series of open questions about the present’s engagement with the past.

To compare how texts in multiple disciplines, genres, and mediums conceive of the past and to use the idea of the past as a starting point for engaging with complex theoretical arguments.

To practice interdisciplinary work by translating between the terms offered by literary and visual studies, philosophy, psychology, and sociology for dealing with the problem of the past.

Assignments and Grading

Over the course of the semester, you will write 2 formal essays. In the first midterm paper (4-6 pages), you will address a question raised in class or in the weekly responses through a close reading of one of the texts on the syllabus. The second will be a research paper (15-20 pages) in which you will examine the role of the past in your own field of interest, closely engaging with primary sources and critical literature and drawing on one or more of the theoretical perspectives introduced in class.

You will also be writing weekly responses to our readings. I ask that you post these to NYU Classes (to the appropriate “Topic” under “Forums”) at least 24 hours before each class to give all of us time to read them before we meet. Part of the assignment for each class will be to read the responses posted for that day. These responses are designed to prepare you for class discussion as well as generate ideas for your essays. While you are welcome to include personal reflections in your responses, you must organize your comments around an analysis of one of the assigned texts, which should include quotes from and references to specific passages. Rather than grading each response individually, I will assign one grade for all of them at the end of the semester.

Each of you will also do one oral presentation on a topic of interest to you and of relevance to the class material for that week. Rather than using this material as a lens for examining your own work, try to experiment with going in the opposite direction: using your own interests and expertise as lenses for understanding a text or idea from our class. How might your research or art help us better understand what we are discussing? What light does your work cast on our material?

From time to time, I may assign brief, informal pieces of writing to be done either at home or in class in preparation for our discussions. I may not collect them, but will often ask you to share them in class. Your work on these will figure into your participation grade.

This course is a seminar, so your regular, active participation in our discussions is crucial. I will expect you to come to class prepared with questions and comments on the day’s reading.

Midterm Paper (4-6 pages): 20%
Research Paper (15-20 pages): 35%
Response Papers (1-2 pages) and Presentation: 25%
Participation: 20%
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’ve gotten the notes, I would 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 all our books at the NYU Bookstore. All other readings will be posted throughout the semester to the Resources folder of our NYU Classes site. Please print these out and bring a hard copy to class.


Schedule

Week 1: Wed, Jan 25
- Introduction
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias” (1818)
- In-class writing and discussion: the past as warning

I. Building and Destroying: The Architectural Past

Week 2: Wed, Feb 1
- Georg Simmel, “The Ruin” (1911)
- Discussion: the meanings of decay; the past as “golden age;” the past as childhood and as loss

Week 3: Wed, Feb 8
- Andreas Huyssen, Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (2003): chapters 1-4 (pp. 11-84)
- Discussion: the past as monument; the aesthetics and politics of preservation and rupture

II. Progressing and Regressing: The Revolutionary Past

Week 4: Wed, Feb 15
- Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1851-52)
- Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)
- Discussion: historical materialism as the law of history; the concept of progress; “homogeneous, empty time” vs. “the ‘time of the now’”; “historicism” vs. “the tradition of the oppressed”; “a tiger’s leap into the past”; “the true picture of the past” as “the spark of hope” “at a moment of danger”

Week 5: Wed, Feb 22
- W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903)
- Discussion: “the meaning of progress”

III. Remembering and Forgetting: The Biographical Past

Week 6: Wed, Mar 1
- Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1873, 1874)
- Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” (1914)
- Suggested reading: Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971)
- Discussion: the “three species of history” (monumental, antiquarian, critical); the imperative to forget; the politics of forgetting; the uses of memory
Week 7: Wed, Mar 8
- Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory: “The Reconstruction of the Past,” “The Localization of Memory,” “The Collective Memory of the Family” (pp. 46-83) (from The Social Frameworks of Memory [1925])
- Discussion: the social locations of memory
- Midterm Paper due

Wed, Mar 15: Spring Break

Week 8: Wed, Mar 22
- Discussion: the past as memory or the past as history; generational memory

Week 9, Wed, Mar 29
- Marcel Proust, Swann’s Way (1913): “Combray I” (pp. 1-64)
- Film: Sans Soleil (1983), dir. Chris Marker
- Discussion: mediums of memory; the past in things (objects of memory); the past in places (spaces of memory); memory voluntary and involuntary

IV. Living and Dying: The Past Terminable and Interminable

Week 10: Wed, Apr 5
- Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)
- Discussion: the uses of repetition (trauma, play, neurosis); the past as death (the return of the repressed as the return to the inanimate state); the past as intergenerational guilt

Week 11: Wed, Apr 12
- Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919)
- Suggested reading: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1840)
- Discussion: the past as afterlife (the return of the repressed as the return to immortality); the return of the living dead; animating the inanimate; the house (or domestic interior) as external memory; the mechanized memory trace

V. Reading and (Re)writing: The Literary Past

Week 12: Wed, Apr 19
- Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own (1929)
- Discussion: the past as “simultaneous order”; the “contemporaneity” of the past; the past as precursor (rival and ally)
Week 13: Wed, Apr 26
- Discussion: the past as erasure; negating the negation: voicing the silence, showing the invisible

Week 14: Wed, May 3
- Discussion: the past as future

Fri, May 12: Research Paper due