

History of Literary Theory and Criticism II
Comparative Literature (CMLIT 82900)
Spring 2025
Thursday, 2-4pm

Professor: Dr. Elizabeth Alsop
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Office Hours: 4-5pm (Room 5108)
or by appointment on Zoom

Course Description

In this course we will survey major texts in the history of literary theory and criticism from the late eighteenth century to the present. Over the course of the semester, we will trace the emergence of modern aesthetics; examine key theoretical approaches, including many of the “isms” of the twentieth century; and consider current critical methods, with a focus on the material, professional, and institutional contexts in which twenty-first-century literary study and commentary is taking place. Coverage of such a broad and complex history is impossible, so the course is designed to introduce students to a range of thinkers and movements that they might explore further on their own. Students will be asked to give an in-class presentation; to participate in the conversation both in-person and online; and to produce a final essay.

Course Materials

Assigned readings will be available to download from our course site on the CUNY Academic Commons. We'll discuss on the first day how to access and use the site: <https://cl89200sp25.commonsgc.cuny.edu/>

A number of our readings will be drawn from *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd edition, designated on the schedule as (NA). You are welcome to purchase their own copies, but it is not required (it's also quite pricey). Copies will also be available on reserve:

The Norton Anthology of Literary Theory & Criticism, 3rd edition. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch, et al. W. W. Norton, 2018. ISBN 978-0393602951

Course Requirements

Participation (including Weekly Questions): 45%

Class Presentation: 20%

Final Paper: 35%

Participation

Ours is a small, discussion-based seminar, so student participation is vital. Please come to class prepared to share your thoughts about the assigned readings, and having identified specific passages you find intriguing, perplexing, frustrating, or illuminating. You are also

encouraged to suggest any additional supplementary articles or artifacts that they come across, and I will likewise share optional readings relevant to our weekly topics.

Weekly Questions

Each week, I'll ask that you post 1-2 questions about our assigned reading to the course site the night before class. These questions are designed to promote close consideration of the week's text/s before we discuss them in class; to give you practice generating questions and observations about theory; and to provide the class with an archive of our collective thinking across the course of the semester. Because we'll often draw on these questions in class, please plan to post them by Wednesday evening at 8pm, so I can review them before we meet.

Presentations

Each member of the class will make an in-class presentation on one of our assigned texts. The presentation should be around 20 minutes and aim to accomplish two goals: first, to provide relevant historical, cultural, and critical contexts for our reading; second, to highlight key concepts and/or moments in the reading, by pointing to and explicating representative portions of the text. Presenters should prepare a few questions for the class that can lead into discussion. Students will sign up for a presentation during the first week of classes.

Final Projects

Students will write an approximately 15-page paper that engages with some work (or works) of theory and criticism we read during the semester. The paper might expand on your presentation or take up a different topic of your choice. I ask that you plan to meet with me to discuss possible ideas for their papers, and to post a proposal and working bibliography for your project to the course site by Week 11. (Note: I am open to compelling proposals for alternative assignments that advance students' academic or professional goals, such as an annotated syllabus for a future course, a shorter paper designed for a conference presentation with accompanying reflection, etc. You should discuss and gain approval for alternative projects with me.)

Course Policies

Communication and Email

I encourage students to meet with me to discuss any course-related issues; my office hours are Thursdays, 4-5pm (right after class in Room 5108) or by appointment on Zoom. Outside of in-person meetings, the best way to contact me is by email. During the week I try to respond to messages within 24 hours; over the weekends, allow 48 hours.

Syllabus Disclaimers

This syllabus may be revised during in the semester at the discretion of the instructor. Any changes will be announced to the class in advance.

Resources and Support

Student Disability Services

Any student who feels they may need an accommodation based upon the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss specific needs. For more information you can contact disabilityservices@gc.cuny.edu.

Student Counseling

The Wellness Center offers short-term individual and group counseling and psychotherapy, couples counseling, consultation and referral services, and a variety of programs and workshops relevant to graduate student life. Their services are confidential, and they are available free of charge to matriculated students. For more information, see <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/student-counseling-services>.

Writing Services and Support

The Office of Career Planning and Professional Development offers writing support to current students. Writing consultants are available to meet with students to review written materials and to discuss writing-related issues. Students can bring writing from a variety of genres, and consultants address questions on both the micro (e.g., sentence structure, grammar, clarity) and macro (e.g., brainstorming, organization) levels. If you have questions, please contact us at writinghelp@gc.cuny.edu. Their website has additional information on workshops, writing groups, and consultations: <https://careerplan.commons.gc.cuny.edu/services/writing>

Comp Lit Student Handbook

Additional information is available in the [Comparative Literature Student Handbook](#).

COURSE SCHEDULE

I. INTRODUCTIONS AND FOUNDATIONS

1/30 Week 1: Introductions, Expectations, Definitions, Questions

Pardis Dabashi, "Introduction to 'Cultures of Argument'"

The American Vandal podcast, Criticism LTD (E1), "[The Golden Age of the Working Critic](#)" (transcript available [here](#))

Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "Some Notes on How to Ask a Good Question About Theory that Will Provoke Conversation and Further Discussion from Your Colleagues"

2/6 Week 2: Kant and 18th-Century Aesthetics (and Introductions, continued)

Immanuel Kant, from *Critique of Judgment*, excerpts of "Analytic of the Beautiful" and "Analytic of the Sublime" (NA)

Terry Eagleton, "Political Criticism," from *Literary Theory: An Introduction*

2/13 Week 3: German Idealism and British Romanticism

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, from *Lectures on Fine Art* (NA)
William Wordsworth, *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1798)

2/20 Week 4: Hermeneutics of Suspicion I: Marx

Karl Marx, from *Capital*, Chapter 1, "Commodities"
Marx and Engels, preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,"
from *The German Ideology*, and from *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (NA)

2/27 Week 5: Hermeneutics of Suspicion II: Freud and Nietzsche

Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," "Fetishism," and from *The Interpretation of Dreams*
Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" (NA)

3/6 NO CLASS - Classes follow a Wednesday schedule

II. FORMALISM/S, STRUCTURALISM, POST-STRUCTURALISM

3/13 Week 6: New Criticism and Its Legacies (visit from Prof. Ria Banerjee)

T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"
John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism, Inc." (NA)
WK Wimsatt and MK Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" (NA)
Rachel Sagner Burma and Laura Heffernan, from *The Teaching Archives*,
"Introduction" and "Chapter 2: T.S. Eliot"

3/20: Week 7: Structuralism and Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure, from *Course in General Linguistics*, Introduction, Ch 1-4
And Part One, Ch 1-2
M.M. Bakhtin, from *Discourse in the Novel* (NA)
Tzvetan Todorov, "Structural Analysis of Narrative"
Roland Barthes, "The Face of Garbo," "The World of Wrestling" from *Mythologies*

3/27 Week 8: Poststructuralism and Deconstruction

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"
Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?"
Jacques Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing"
Barbara Johnson, "Teaching Deconstructively"

III. "POLITICAL" CRITICISM : GENDER, SEXUALITY, RACE, CLASS

4/3 **Week 9: Some Feminisms (Class on Zoom—Prof. Alsop at SCMS)**

Virginia Woolf, from *A Room of One's Own*
bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators"
Barbara Johnson, "Muteness Envy"
Sadiya Hartman, from *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*

4/10 **Week 10: Marxist Criticism**

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry"
Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture"

4/17 **NO CLASS – Spring Break**

4/24 **Week 11: Postcolonial Theory / Race and Ethnic Studies**

Edward Said, from *Culture and Imperialism*, Chapter 2, "Consolidated Vision" (i-ii)
Toni Morrison, from *Playing in the Dark*, "Black Matters"
Franz Fanon, "On National Culture" from *The Wretched of the Earth*

5/1 **Week 12: Queer Theory / Gender Studies**

Michel Foucault, "We 'Other Victorians'" from *The History of Sexuality*
Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"
José Muñoz, "Introduction" from *Cruising Utopia*
Matt Brim, from *Poor Queer Studies*

IV. CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

5/8 **Week 13: Method Wars: Critique vs Post-Critique, Theory vs Auto-/Anti-Theory**

Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading"
Rita Felski, "Introduction," from *The Limits of Critique*
Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"
Anna Kornbluh, "Anti-Theory," from *Immediacy*

5/15 **Week 14: Conclusions and Some Recent Approaches: Affect Theory, Ecocriticism, New Formalism (Choose Your Own Adventure)**

Sianne Ngai, from *Ugly Feelings* or
Rob Nixon, from *Slow Violence* (NA) or
Caroline Levine, "Introduction: The Affordances of Form"

Kandice Chuh, from *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, “On Aesthetic Inquiry”
American Vandal, “Criticism LTD,” 3-Part Conclusion (Episodes 14-16, any/all)

5/22 Final Projects Due (Optional Meeting, TBD!)