

Theory in Practice

Critical Discourses in the Humanities



Has there ever been a gay Socrates? Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare? Has there ever been a gay Proust? Does the Pope wear a dress? If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies.

Eve K. Sedgwick



It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

W.E.B. Dubois



For a girl, the university is not the place where she will achieve her liberation by means of culture, but the place where, after having been carefully prepared by the family, her repression will be completed.

Carla Lonzi



Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines.

Donna Haraway



We laughed with the black men, with the white people. We laughed at this black woman who was not us. And we did not even long to be there on the screen. How could we long to be there when our image, visually constructed, was so ugly.

bell hooks

What is a postcolonial subject, a queer gaze, a feminist manifesto? And how can we use (as critical readers) contemporary studies on animals and cyborgs, objects and zombies? In this course, we will read some pivotal theoretical texts from different fields, with a focus on raceðnicity and gender&sexuality. Each theory will be paired with a masterpiece from Italian culture (from Renaissance paintings to stories written under fascism and postwar films). We will discuss how to apply theory to the practice of interpretation and of academic writing, and how theoretical ideas may have shaped what we are reading.

Alessandro Giammei

(he, him, his · lui, lo, gli, tu)

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Office hours:

M 4:15-5:15 · Th 11:15 · 12:15
 106 Old Library

Class schedule:

M & W, 2:40-4:00
 251 Old Library

Assessment components:

20% · Contribution to class
 20% · In Class Presentation(s)
 25% · Midterm exercise
 35% · Essay in lieu of Final

Reading

(either on Moodle or in our Library Course Reserve, no purchase necessary)

- 15-40 pages of theory (1 or 2 essays) each week
- 20-50 pages of literature and/or 1 film most weeks (short literary texts—or no other texts at all—are assigned when theory readings are longer) + images of works of art
- optional further readings

Speaking

(each presentation will be guided)

- Every week I will assign one of the keywords to each of you. On Monday, class will start with a round of brief presentations on the keywords
- On Wednesdays, a small team will present the primary material (10-15 minutes)

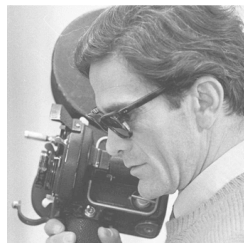
Writing

(some class time will be devoted to writing prep/workshop)

- For the Midterm, I will give you three objects: a short story, a short film, and a painting. I will ask you to think about them for a week, then choose one of them, and interpret it through the theoretical tools that we have worked with in the first half of the semester (5-8 pages)
- For the Final, I will ask you to write an original critical analysis of a work of art, literature, or cinema of your choice as a scholarly paper (10-12 pages). We will workshop ideas for this paper in class and I will give you feedback on your first draft



Natalia Ginzburg, writer



Pier Paolo Pasolini, writer and filmmaker



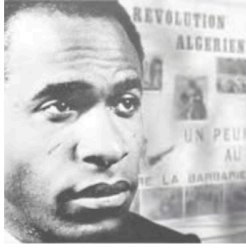
Igiaba Scego, writer



Michelangelo, artist and poet



Sara Copio Sulam, writer and public speaker



When people like me, they like me "in spite of my color." When they dislike me; they point out that it isn't because of my color. Either way, I am locked in to the infernal circle.

Frantz Fanon



The philosophy of praxis does not aim at the peaceful resolution of existing contradictions in history and society, but is the very theory of these contradictions.

Antonio Gramsci



In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly.

Laura Mulvey

I designed this class as a seminar/workshop about theoretical tools and ideas that matter to me as a humanist. An important lesson that I hope to teach you is already in the syllabus: I don't believe that one theory is enough. The material that I selected for our conversations is, indeed, just a selection: a choice. I encourage you to explore, with my help, ideas beyond the ones that I chose, and to bring them in the classroom for the benefit of everyone. A seminar/workshop works if we work together, as a collective, to figure out what the theoretical readings are about, why they are

relevant, and how we can use them to interpret our primary material (and the world in general). While I hope you will use theory creatively and originally, this class is about understanding theories that exist and build on them: it is not a philosophy class or a debate club, images and texts (including theoretical texts) are at the center of our investigation.

MATERIAL

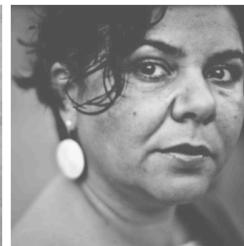
All required readings and images are on Moodle. In order for us to be able to read different theorists and writers, in most cases readings are excerpts from larger essays or books. Integral works are always available in the library, in our Course Reserve. Secondary readings (the texts on which we will apply theory), images and films are by prominent Italian or Italophone authors, artists, and filmmakers. Some of these objects can be very controversial or even offensive. I do not put trigger warnings on published works of art, literature, theory, or cinema; however, I welcome criticism about them in class. One of the goal of this course is to learn how to look at cultural artifacts with critical detachment, and to extract information from every aspect of them (style, content, language) while making hypotheses about a variety of problems (their original contexts, their subsequent reception, their importance today). To help in this process, I selected some further readings available either on Moodle or in our Course Reserve. These texts are mostly meant to provide authoritative interpretations of our topics and specific analyses of literary texts, films, and works of art. All the material is very heterogeneous: some texts will be easy to read, others will be puzzling. I don't expect you to navigate all texts, films, and works of art with ease: I struggle myself with some of our readings, and I believe that difficulty is sometimes a value in the Humanities. Bring questions and interpretative challenges in class and let's approach them together. I suggest to read both theory and literature (and to look at images) a little bit every day, but you can set your own reading pace as long as you come to class on Monday with your "Theory Readings" done and on Wednesday with your "Art&Literature" digested.

KEYWORDS & PRESENTATIONS

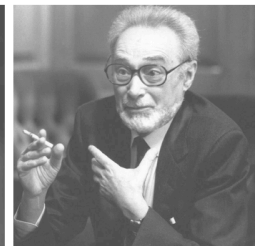
Every Monday, class will start with a round of brief presentations (1-2 minutes) about the weekly keywords. To prepare for this task you can very well start from google and wikipedia, but please go beyond that. Some tools for further research are: jstor.com, muse.jhu.edu, the TriCo library catalogue (many resources are online), and of course our Course Reserve. Most keywords will be used in the theory readings, and you can reflect on the way they bring about ideas. Some of them will be absolutely new to you, while some will look familiar: when the meaning seems too obvious, try to figure out how it can expand within the specific topic of our discussion. You are welcome to suggest further keywords.



Leonardo da Vinci, polymath



Michela Murgia, writer and activist



Primo Levi, writer and chemist

Every Wednesday, a team of two or more students will open the discussion in class with a presentation (10-20 minutes) based on either literary texts or the visual material of the week. A successful presentation briefly reads and interrogates the texts/images themselves, connects them with the theoretical readings, and concludes with interpretative questions for the class. Each presentation will be scheduled at least one week in advance and will be guided by me. Ideally, everyone will choose their week and team. The team will collaborate on every aspect of the presentation and I will evaluate the process, not the performance.

CLASS DISCUSSION

This course is based on our collective interaction with ideas and material, so attendance and participation are essential. Our class time is limited, so we have to be focused, prepared, and respectful of everyone's voice and ideas. Any interpretative attempt based on texts, images, and films is welcome. Please, be sure to give everyone an opportunity to speak in class. You are always welcome to further discuss the material with me during office hours if you didn't have a chance to say everything that you wanted to say during class. Please, be sure to respect different approaches, cultures, and learning styles in the classroom: I am myself a non-native speaker, and I hope you will be patient with my English.

EXAMS

Detailed information about both the Midterm exercise and the Final essay are in the calendar section of this syllabus. The first will consist of a critical interpretation of text, painting, or film after a period of reading, discussion, and reflection. The second will be an original interpretative essay on an object (or theme) of your choice. In both cases, I ask you to make use of the theoretical ideas that we discuss in class, and to write about something that matters to you and that you think should matter to anyone. Depending on your interests, your Final can be closer to an Art History paper, to a Literary Criticism paper, to a Philosophy paper, or to a Comparative paper: during the class-time reserved for workshop we will define specific structures and conventions related to your particular field of interest.

GUESTS & EXTRA ACTIVITIES

A number of guests will visit our class, including Chiara Valerio (mathematician, writer, and publisher) who will speak about Natalia Ginzburg and feminism; and Michela Murgia, author of our literary reading for week 2. I would like to organize one class trip to Philadelphia, to look at works of art in person, and a screening of at least one of our films. We will figure out together if this is practically possible (in terms of resources and time) during the second half of the semester.

ITALIAN CONCENTRATORS

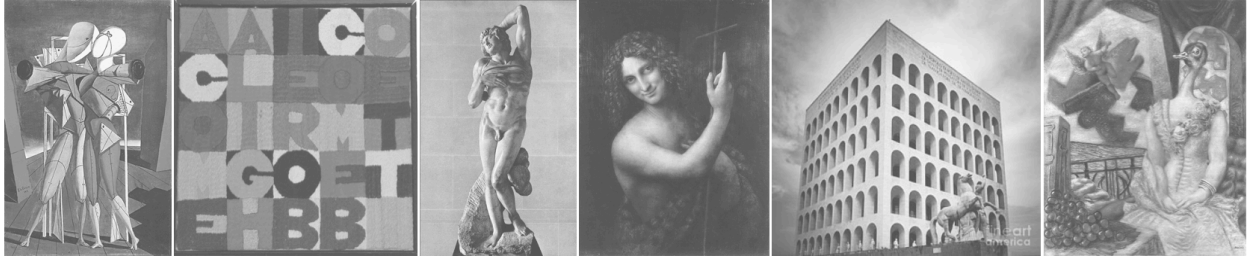
Students who seek credit towards language requirements will read literary texts in the original Italian and will write either the Midterm exercise or the Final essay in Italian. We will also meet for an additional hour of conversation on the material in Italian—the schedule will be based on all the participants' availabilities.

ACCESS

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Students can call 610-526-7516 to make an appointment with the Access Services Director, Deb Alder, or email her at dalder@brynmawr.edu to begin this confidential process. Once registered, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share the verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>). Any student who has a disability-related need to tape record this class first must speak with the Access Services Director and to me.—class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

HONOR CODE

In completing all your assignments for this course, you are expected to abide by the Bryn Mawr College Honor Code. See sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/honor-code/ for more information. Note in particular that using someone else's ideas or words without quotation marks and/or bibliographic references is not acceptable in Humanities classes. When in doubt (and within reason), ask me.



CLASS CALENDAR

September 5

Week 1

Theory

Object, method, and premise of this course. What is theory and why do we care? How can we use it, how should we read it, how does it translate in various disciplines.

No assignment. Please, watch these clips from *Dead Poets Society* and *La Grande Bellezza*
<https://youtu.be/LjHORRHxtyI>
<https://youtu.be/wMjovG2PqZM>

September 10 - 12

Week 2

Author(ity)

Do authors exist, and what are they anyway? Authority in and out art and theory. Reality and fiction as structures. The authority of theorists and of readers.

Theory

- Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*
- Michel Foucault, *What is an author?*

Art & Literature

- Natalia Ginzburg, *My Vocation* and *Human relations* [short stories]
- Alighiero Boetti, *Maps* [images]

Keywords

diegesis, philology, structuralism, deconstruction, reception, postmodern, hermeneutical circle, message, canon, tradition

September 17 - 19

Week 3

Subaltern

Power relations in the world, in the text, in the hermeneutical circle. Colonialism as a model to understand the history of art and literature. How to be post-colonial.

Theory

- Antonio Gramsci, excerpts from *The Prison Notebooks*

Art & Literature

- Michela Murgia, *Accabadora* [4 chapters of a novel]
- The Monument of the Four Moors in Livorno [sculpture, images]

Keywords

intellectual, masses, hegemony, postcolonial, margin, common-sense, materialism, marxist, class, south

Psyche

Who is psychoanalyzed when we apply Psychology to art and literature? Freud's work and its relevance. From psychology to neuroaesthetics and the cognitive subconscious.

Theory

· Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* [it's fine if you don't manage to read the last chapter (but please try!)]

Art & Literature

· Leonardo da Vinci, *Monnalisa*, *Saint Anne*, *John the Baptist* [images]

Keywords

subconscious, uncanny, oedipal complex, uber-ich, ich, es, catharsis, counter-wish, dream, totem

Race

Race and ethnicity as cultural, structural, and cognitive paradigms. The theorization of race and its application to works of literature and art. The risky problem of identity (whose identity?).

Theory

· Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

Art & Literature

· Primo Levi, *Iron and Cerium* [short stories]

· Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Notes Towards and African Orestes* [film]

Keywords

whiteness, intersectionality, identity, performance, brown, visibility, naturalism, phrenology, orientalism, cultural studies, segregation

Consciousness

Double consciousness in characters, authors, readers. Hierarchies of voices in texts and images. Intersectionality within identity poetics.

Theory

· W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

· Frantz Fanon, *The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized People*

Art & Literature

· Igiaba Scego, *Sausages* [short story]

· Fascist public art [images]

Keywords

double consciousness, othering, anticolonial, cosmopolitanism, negritude, francophonie, conversion theory, passing, dependency, lactification

Break

During the break, you will have time to read/watch the three objects for the Midterm exercise and think about them.

Due date for the Midterm: October 26 at midnight

Midterm exercise

Before the break, I will give you a short story, a short film, and a painting. You will choose one, and you will interpret it through the theoretical tools that we have worked on so far. The comment will be **between 5 and 8 typed pages** (double spaced, Times New Roman, 1 inch margins, no references/notes).

Before you write your comment, you are allowed to discuss the objects with your classmates and with me. You are allowed to collaborate throughout your reading experience (debates, brain-storming, exchange of ideas) but not when you are writing. If interactions with other people or previous readings beyond those in this syllabus contributed to the ideas in your writing, I expect you to mention your sources. I encourage you to take advantage of resources on campus (especially the writing center) to enhance your critical writing abilities.

You will write your interpretation alone and autonomously, in no more than 5 hours, without consulting, while writing, any sources but the text / film / image (no books, no notes, no web pages, etc.). You can write whenever and wherever you want, as long as you submit your comment by midnight on October 26 (please, email a PDF version to me by the deadline)

40 % of your midterm grade will be determined by your use of the essays that we read. I expect you to discuss your object using at least two of the theoretical ideas that we encountered.

Another 40 % portion of the grade will be determined by your engagement with the object. I expect your analysis to be punctual and strictly based on aspects of the object that you are commenting (details, characters, stylistic traits, themes, references to cultural and artistic motives, points of view, etc.). I want you to ask “what is this about?” and find possible answers within the object.

The remaining 20 % portion of the grade will be determined by your own ideas. I expect your ideas to emerge from your use of both primary and secondary resources (i.e., your object and the theoretical ideas that you use to read it). This doesn't mean that you have to found a new branch in theory: I just want you to ask “how does this matter to me?” and find possible answers in the suggestions offered by both theory and art.



October 22 - 24

Week 8

Woman

Is there a feminist way to read/see/write? Radical feminism and other feminisms. The body as a theoretical object. Gender vs. Sexuality.

Theory

· Carla Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel*

Art & Literature

· Sara Copio Sulam, *Manifesto of the Jewish Woman* [public dialogue]

· Amedeo Modigliani, nudes [images]

Keywords

mansplaining, third wave, radical lesbianism, clitoridian woman, phallocentrism, difference, Diotima, alienation, patriarchy, penis envy

Gaze

The effect of gaze within diegesis and out of it. The expected role of the observer in the shaping of a character or a scene. Masculinity and whiteness as non-neutral filters.

Theory	Art & Literature	Keywords
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Laura Mulvey, <i>Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema</i> · bell hooks, <i>The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Luca Guadagnino, <i>Call Me by Your Name</i> [film] · Portraits of Alessandro de Medici and his family by Pontormo, Vasari, Bronzino, Polo, and others [images] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · spectator, frame, fetishism, scopophilia, mutuality, free indirect speech, mirror stage, panopticon, tourist, hawthorne effect

Queer

Queer authors vs. queer texts/images/films vs. queer readers. Heteronormativity and its antidotes. The trans-historical category of camp.

Theory	Art & Literature	Keywords
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Eve K. Sedgwick, <i>Epistemology of the closet</i> (excerpt) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Michelangelo Buonarroti, <i>Poems for Tommaso de Cavalieri</i> [poems] · Michelangelo Buonarroti, <i>Slaves and The Last Judgement</i> [images] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · normativity, feral, gaga feminism, repressive hypothesis, act up, perverse desire, sex, gender, orientation, binarism

Cyborg

Humanism and the post-human. What if the human self from which we think we are reading is an arbitrary, imprecise invention? Anthropocentrism as a fallible point of view.

Theory	Art & Literature	Keywords
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Donna Haraway, <i>A Cyborg Manifesto</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Carlo Collodi, <i>Pinocchio</i> [4 chapters from novel] · Giorgio de Chirico, <i>Metaphysical paintings (1913-1918)</i> [images] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · humanism, posthuman, transhumanism, anthropocene, affinity, oppositional consciousness, situatedness, techno-progressivism, information, biopolitics

Animal

The animal perspective on reality and art. What is an animal? Are some animals subaltern subjects, and should we decolonize them? The ethics of animalism.

Theory	Art & Literature	Keywords
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Donna Haraway, <i>When Species Meet</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Giacomo Leopardi, <i>Dialogue between a Goblin and a Gnome</i> [philosophical dialogue] · Umberto Saba, selections from <i>The Songbook</i> [poems] · Alberto Savinio, Zoomorphic paintings [images] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> animot, anthrozoology, selfish gene, speciesism, captivity, sanctuary, anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, discontinuous mind, exceptionalism

Thing

Theories of objecthood and thingness. Ontology as a mid-way between overdetermination and silence. Stuff as a realm of investigation.

Theory	Art & Literature	Keywords
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Bill Brown, <i>Thing Theory</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Giulia Niccolai, <i>Poema & Oggetto</i> and <i>Humpty Dumpty</i> · Giorgio Morandi, Still lives [images] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> OOO (object oriented ontology), still-life, vibrant matter, correlationism, hyperobject, obsolete objects, objective correlative, hoarding, glimmero, practice of misuse

Zombie

Zombie theory. What is life? And what do apocalypses (fictional and otherwise) reveal? The zombie as a paradigm to evade both humanism and the post-human.

Theory	Art & Literature	Keywords
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, <i>A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Giovanni Boccaccio, <i>Decameron</i> [introduction to collection of stories] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> consumerism, grotesque, apocalypse, carnivalesque, germ theory, plant studies (criticism), pop-culture, allegory, disability studies, bios/zoê

Universe

Storyworlds, expanded universes, and intermediality. The narratology behind great commercial phenomena of contemporary culture and their early modern roots.

Theory

· John Noel Thon, *The Storyworld as a Transmedial Concept*

Art & Literature

· *Avengers: Infinity Wars* [film]

Keywords

transmediality, storyworld, MCU, rhizome, principle of minimal departure, holocron, continuity, storyline, fanart, spin-off

Final Essay**Rubric**

During the last two weeks of class, we will workshop ideas for the Final Essay. You shall start by asking yourself what idea, text, image, film, or class discussion was the most relevant and interesting for you as a humanist. From there, we can think together about the approach, the method, and the resources for your paper. The essay that you will write will be based on autonomous research, to be conducted on our course material and expanded using electronic databases and library resources. Description, even if inspired by theoretical ideas, is not sufficient: I ask you to try and make a point about the object of your analysis. Class time will be devoted to group activities that will help you strategizing this aspect of the paper. **All Final Essays are due on December 22 at 12:30 pm.** You can turn in a draft or an outline by December 17, and I will send it back with my comments and suggestions. You are allowed to collaborate with your classmates on the preparation of the essay (group research, brainstorming, discussion) but you will write the essay itself autonomously and alone. You are allowed to consult any source while writing. Please, cite all the sources consulted and used, and adopt the Chicago Manual of Style (available in the library and here: chicagomanualofstyle.org/16/contents.html) for references and formatting.

FORMAL ASPECTS 10%

I expect the paper to be typed (12pts., double space, 1 inch margin), within the page limits (10-12), submitted as a PDF file, and consistent with the Manual of Style. Include a title, a 100 words abstract, and proper citations for all textual or visual sources used.

LANGUAGE AND ORGANIZATION 20%

I expect you to use the proper terminology that you have learned throughout the semester and to write clearly. I encourage you to re-write, to ask peers to proof-read your writing, to make use of the writing center on campus.

THEORETICAL BREATH 30%

I expect you to show clearly the role of theoretical ideas in your paper, and to directly engage with such ideas in your analysis.

ORIGINALITY AND INDEPENDENT RESEARCH 40%

This essay should stem from your own ideas and your research, it is not enough to repeat the class discussions. Google is a good point of departure for any question, but it should never be the main source for your speculations and hypotheses (i.e. you do need to go to the library!). You are welcome to ask for guidance: part of this assignment consists in discussing your essay project with me, and I will help you with bibliographic suggestions, feedback on your ideas, and information about the kind of specific research that your topic of choice might need.