

ENGLISH 704-01:
STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY (3 CR.)
High Theory Comes Back - Aesthetics, Ethics, Politics

Professor Christian Moraru
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MHRA 1213, T 6:30-9:20 PM
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COURSE DESCRIPTION: This is a critical theory seminar that focuses on the late-20th-century-early 21st-century return of “high theory” to the U. S. academy, with a particular focus on how recent theorists reconceptualize the aesthetic in the context of global, “multitudinal” society of the post-Cold War era. To many, this theoretical revival has been a surprising development given the much bandied-about “crisis of theory” in the 1990s. Nonetheless, despite the self-assured statements about the demise of theory and the “post-theory” age presumably marking the humanities in North America, and notwithstanding the real impasse certain critical models have arguably reached of late, theory has made a spectacular comeback in forms redolent, in fact, of the “high theory” of the 1960s and 1970s. For the theoretical discourse that is regaining momentum around the dawn of the third millennium is philosophical in nature or grounded in Continental, primarily French and German philosophy; said discourse also thrives on the productive frictions among the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political; and it does not shy away from bold, often highly controversial claims either.

These are, most broadly, some of the features shared by our theorists. Among them, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and Nicolas Bourriaud can be said to belong to the new wave, although somebody like Badiou has been around for a while. His impact in the U. S., however, is by and large a recent phenomenon. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are, on the other hand, anything but newcomers. Arguably more influential today than other poststructuralist thinkers, they continue to shape the conversation on a range of issues taken up by the new theorists, from the singular and the territorial to affect and the dialectic of the artistic and the conceptual. In this class, we will also discuss works by two Italians, Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri, who, for a while now, have been engaged in rethinking key, interrelated issues such as the singular and the communal, the ethical and the aesthetic, the event, the new, and the political. We will also read some fiction (DeLillo and Houellebecq) “with” theory, not always with the expectation that theory will be explicitly “about” our two novels (or vice versa), but rather in hopes to frame the latter’s discussion in illuminating, provocatively problematizing ways.

PEDAGOGICAL METHODOLOGY AND CLASS FORMAT: Running for almost three hours, our seminar combines lecture, extensive discussion, student presentations, and group work. Usually, the meetings will open with a lecture by the instructor providing historical, cultural, and theoretical background and placing the scheduled readings in the appropriate context. Following this introduction, students give 15-20-minute individual presentations on specific aspects of those readings. Then, we discuss collectively the materials for the day. I will set aside time to talk about papers, final project presentations, and so forth.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES: Graduate students are encouraged to use this course to put their work in the larger, more demanding and highly competitive perspective of professionalism and academic performance. The class is geared toward graduate reading and writing carrying potential for publication and presentation outside UNCG. While fulfilling the course's requirements is your main goal, I urge you to take these requirements as an opportunity to think about yourselves as part of the academic community, with its standards, language, methods, tools, and venues. Here are a few questions for us: Where do I stand as a scholar, teacher, critic, and writer now, and which are my goals? What is, or will be, my audience? What kind of scholarly conversation do I wish to join based on what I learn in this class about specific works, concepts, critical paradigms, on the one hand, and research techniques and professionalism overall, on the other hand? Where do I stand right now in terms of my preparation for intervening in the scholarly debate and, if I am not quite ready, what steps do I have to take? What are the available resources? Which are the outlets for my work? What do I have to do, for instance, to turn my seminar presentation/paper into a conference paper/journal article/dissertation chapter/writing sample?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Midterm Exam: Take-home, 4-5 single-spaced pp.
2. Final paper (20 double-spaced pp. plus notes and Works Cited). For this project, the first step is a 1-p., single-spaced, paper proposal describing what you want to do, your focus, working thesis, the integration of theory and primary sources, etc. While the project should broadly pursue the general theme of the course, feel free to incorporate material outside our reading list. I would like to get your proposal at least a few hours prior to the one-on-one meeting where we will discuss your paper; I urge you to make an appointment for that meeting. If that meeting does not take place, I would appreciate getting the proposal a few days before the class when you are scheduled to present your final project.
3. Individual oral presentations on the materials for the day. Guidelines for presentations: Students sign up for their final project and oral presentations right away so that we can spread out the presentations over the course of the semester. Each student will give a brief, 15-20-min. talk on the scheduled readings. The presentations need not be written, but you may want to prepare a handout for your peers. Presentations cover a relevant aspect or material for the day. I do not expect you to fully analyze or explain the assignments or even one of these assignments. I ask you to a) briefly outline the argument or content of the readings you intent to talk about; then, b) identify one major element or problem in these works, which should help us open up a

conversation in tune with the core problematic of the course as articulated above. Feel free to consult with me before you pick your presentation topic.

4. Final Project Presentation: Students give a 10-min. presentation on their project (see syllabus, last weeks).

5. Attendance and Oral Participation. Both are expected and will factor into the final grade (see below under course policies).

GRADING: As a general rule, no incompletes (but come to see me if you anticipate any problems). The quality of your work will be reflected in the final grade as follows:

1. Midterm: 25%
2. Final paper: 55%
3. Oral participation (includes group work and all presentations): 20%

CONFERENCES: Please meet with me during my regular office hours or make an appointment to discuss your specific interests, goals, or any aspect of this class. We will also talk about your plans for the final project.

COURSE POLICIES: Late Papers: No late papers—and any other kind of work for that matter—accepted. However, if you foresee any deadline-related problems, please come to see me ahead of time. We shall work together to find a solution.

ABSENCES: You are allowed no more than 2 (two) justified absences during the semester for illnesses (which you must document afterwards), religious holidays, or emergencies preventing you from attending. No undocumented absences allowed. Should they occur, they will affect your final grade. I will subtract 5% from the latter for any undocumented absence. Since we meet once a week, attendance is particularly critical to the success of our work in this class. If you are the victim of an emergency, please stay in touch with me by e-mail or phone.

REQUIRED READINGS:

THEORY

1. Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 or latest pbk.
2. Badiou, Alain. *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004 or latest pbk.
3. Bourriaud, Nicholas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon, France: Les Presses du réel; New York: Idea Books, 2002 or latest pbk.
4. Buchanan, Ian, and John Marks, eds. *Deleuze and Literature*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2001 or latest pbk.

5. Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *What Is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1996 or latest pbk.
7. Negri, Antonio. *Art and Multitude*. Malden, MA: Polity, 2011 or latest pbk.
8. Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum, 2006 or latest pbk.
9. ———. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum, 2010 or latest pbk.

FICTION

10. Houellebecq, Michel. *The Map and the Territory*. New York: Knopf, 2012 or latest pbk.
11. DeLillo, Don. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner, 2003 or latest pbk.

NOTE ON ASSIGNMENTS: Readings are for the day they come under.

NOTE ON BLACKBOARD MATERIALS: You must go to the English 704-01 Blackboard website by 4 PM before each class to check if there is a handout posted for that day. If there is one, download it bring it with you to class.

WEEKLY SYLLABUS:

Week 1

Tue 08/21 Presentation of the syllabus, readings, requirements. General introduction of the survey's topic: pivotal concepts in theory's history – text, culture, affect, aesthetics. Method and approach.
Start reading *Underworld* (due 09/11) and *The Map and the Territory*, in this order.
Discussion groups
Individual presentations sign-up
Final project presentations sign-up

Week 2

Tue 08/28 Retheorizing the aesthetic: the geoaesthetic
A[ssignments]: Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* vii-113

Week 3

Tue 09/04 Affect, aesthetics, concept
A: Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 117-218
Conley, "I and My Deleuze," in Buchanan and Marks, *Deleuze and Literature* 263-282

Week 4

Tue 09/11 Deleuze, Guattari, *Underworld*, and the poetics of the event

DeLillo, geoaesthetics, and geopolitics

A: DeLillo, *Underworld*

Marks, “*Underworld: The People Are Missing*,” in Buchanan and Marks, *Deleuze and Literature* 80-99

Colebrook, “Inhuman Irony: The Event of the Postmodern,” in Buchanan and Marks, *Deleuze and Literature* 100-134

Week 5

Tue 09/18

Art, singularity, and eventfulness

A: Negri, *Art and Multitude*

Underworld

Week 6

Tue 09/25

The singular, the multitudinal, and the communal

A: Agamben, *The Coming Community*

Group work on midterm: Suggestions due (e-mail) by 10/06

Week 7

Tue 10/02

No class; I will be attending a conference in the UK

Week 8

Tue 10/09

Multitudes, “the people,” and the politics of art: an “ethical turn”? (I)

Underworld and the communal

A: Rancière, *Dissensus* 1-111

Midterm exam assigned

Week 9

Tue 10/16

Spring Break; no class

Week 10

Tue 10/23

Multitudes, the people, and the politics of art: an “ethical turn”? (II)

A: Rancière, *Dissensus* 115-218

Also review your notes on Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 117-218

Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*

Midterm exam due in class

Week 11

Tue 10/30

Rancière, Houellebecq, and “a/political art”

A: Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*

Week 12

Tue 11/06

The aesthetic and the “inaesthetic”

A: Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*

Final project presentations

Discussing the midterm

Week 13

Tue 11/13 Badiou, Houellebecq, DeLillo: The “inaesthetic” or, when art makes us “think”
Final project presentations

Week 14

Tue 11/20 From “inaesthetics” to relational aesthetics; relationality in DeLillo and Houellebecq
A: Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*
Final project presentations

Week 15

Tue 11/27 Last class
Final project presentations
Course overview
Final evaluations
Final papers due in class