THE SCHOOL OF CRITICISM AND THEORY

PROSPECTUS

2018 SUMMER SESSION
JUNE 17 - JULY 26

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

http://sct.cornell.edu
Thank you for your interest in the School of Criticism and Theory (SCT). Since its founding in 1976, SCT has been a summer institute offering an innovative program of study focused on key conceptual issues and current debates across the humanities and social sciences. SCT is sponsored by a consortium of some thirty major American and foreign universities and is currently in the process of establishing further international partnerships. Initially based at the University of California-Irvine, the program has over the years been hosted by Northwestern University, Dartmouth College, and Cornell University, where it has been housed since 1997, in the beautiful A.D. White House, home to Cornell’s Society for the Humanities. Its current location in Ithaca offers participants, faculty, and visitors the natural beauty of New York’s Finger Lakes region, the vibrancy and cultural richness of a large college town, and the resources of an Ivy League university, including its outstanding library, to which all participants and faculty are given access during their stay at the summer institute.

Every summer, SCT assembles eight distinguished faculty for four six-week and four one-week seminars. It also admits between eighty and a hundred participants (advanced graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty), who sign up for one of the longer seminars and actively participate in all other events (mini-seminars, public lectures, and colloquia around precirculated faculty papers). The intensive format of the summer institute enables participants to forge lifelong intellectual friendships as well as strong connections with the group of faculty and other visitors, which often include members of SCT’s distinguished group of Senior Fellows. In addition to the seminars, lectures, and colloquia, SCT hosts an impressive amount of receptions and social events in which participants have the chance to interact more informally with each other and with the faculty, senior fellows, visitors, and the Cornell academic community.

From its inception, SCT has played an important role as an annual scholarly and intellectual platform on which the drama of the somewhat fruitless theory wars and the questionable virtue of vain polemics is resolutely sidestepped. Instead a climate of rigorous investigations and courteous debate of “themes out of school,” as Stanley Cavell once aptly called them, is both widely honored and consistently fostered. In the best tradition of critical and comparative studies across a wide variety of historical and literary fields as well as empirical and visual disciplines, the School invites thinkers who cherish the life of the mind, the force of the better argument, and the courage of imagination, while never forgetting the concrete political responsibilities that more abstract reflections entail. Beyond the infatuation with identities and cultures, national literatures and cosmopolitanisms, humanisms and antihumanisms, old and new historicisms and their opposing structuralisms, close or distant reading, mind or matter, beings and things, SCT seeks out forms of undogmatic inquiry into modes and moods of genuine thinking and practice that are both analytical and constructive, meditative and deeply engaged.

In this prospectus, you will find all relevant information about the coming year’s summer session, the application process and existing possibilities for financial aid, and living arrangements.
“Genealogies of Memory and Perception: Literature and Photography”

Since its advent in the nineteenth century, photography has been a privileged figure in literature’s efforts to reflect upon its own modes of representation. This seminar will trace the history of the rapport between literature and photography by looking closely at a number of literary and theoretical texts that differently address questions central to both literature and photography: questions about the nature of subjectivity, representation, reproduction, memory, perception, knowledge, images, and history. Reading texts by Nadar, Baudelaire, Bergson, Breton, Proust, Kracauer, Benjamin, Barthes, Carson, Ritsos, and Derrida, we will be interested in explicit discussions of photography but also in the ways in which these texts repeatedly have recourse to the language of photography. For these writers, photography provides an entire vocabulary for what Proust calls “the optics of the mind”: the flashes of insight and intuition, the light and shadows that enable and interrupt perception, the workings of memory as it tries to seize or fix an image, and in general the various ways in which we perceive or represent the world around us. We will also try to account for recurring motifs within this history. Why is it, for example, that many of these texts associate photography with meditations on the relations between death and memory? Why do figures of photography so often call forth hallucinations, ghosts, and phantoms? In what way is citation within a literary text a kind of photography? If photography is another name for the relation between light and writing, between referents and mirrors, can we begin to read the relation between photography and literature in texts such as Plato’s allegory of the cave, Ovid’s story of Narcissus and Echo, or the myth of Medusa? Guided by these questions, we will throughout try to think about the relation between vision and language, images and history, media and politics.
This seminar will examine the philosophical contours of Theodor W. Adorno’s aesthetic theory, with an emphasis on the dialectical relation between the modernist artwork and modern society. The mediatized character of late-modern culture has brought unprecedented challenges to conventional models of aesthetic form, and the high-bourgeois ideal of aesthetic autonomy has begun to collapse. This has compromised the dialectical tension between social and aesthetic power that once informed high modernism—a tension which Adorno considered as a necessary condition for critical reflection. On the one hand, the “aura” of the artwork has begun to dissolve, though not as Walter Benjamin might have expected (for the sake of aesthetic-political mass mobilization); instead, artworks have lost their capacity to sustain a kind of critical resistance to society and have become commodities available for passive consumption. On the other hand, social theory itself suffers from a kind of bad conscience concerning the relative autonomy of the aesthetic: in the name of “populist” or democratic expression, the very ideal of the artwork as a site external to society now appears a remnant of a defunct and elitist metaphysics. In our seminar we will explore Adorno’s philosophical and aesthetic reflections on this predicament, and we will ask ourselves how—or if—the modern artwork can sustain its status as a force of social resistance in the midst of the culture industry. We will address this problem through a careful reconstruction of central arguments and themes in Adorno’s philosophy.
What do critics do?

Four of the most foundational answers to this question are: describe, interpret, evaluate and explain.

Each of these activities raises a host of questions that have long preoccupied scholars in the human sciences.

To describe is to represent, and therefore to enter the thicket of complications associated with any act of representation.

To interpret is to determine meaning, but scholars have developed little consensus about what constitutes valid meaning or valid ways of deciding what a work of art means.

To evaluate is to determine the success or failure, goodness or badness of an object in both ethical and aesthetic terms. Once the hallmark of criticism, both inside and outside the academy, explicit evaluation has become less acceptable within scholarship, due to a consensus that value judgments often represent nothing more than self-interested bids for power and prestige. Nonetheless, implicit evaluation remains central to the many forms of humanistic scholarship that judge works of art in terms of their political motives and effects.

Explanation, understood as shorthand for the act of assigning origins and causes, has long been a staple of historical scholarship, and therefore looms largest in historicist approaches to literature, art, and music. But even the most historicist humanists today tend to subject any causal explanation to corrosive scrutiny and have few protocols for developing persuasive ways of answering the question “Why?”

We will explore these questions by reading landmark works in humanistic criticism that both perform and theorize description, interpretation, evaluation, and explanation, as well as break down the distinctions between them.
Tracy McNulty, Professor of French and Comparative Literature, Cornell University
“Intersubjective Acts: Psychoanalysis and Politics”

Freud’s few direct engagements with politics are noteworthy both for their extreme pessimism and for their tendency to reduce the political field to the narcissism of the ego and the superegoic dimensions of group identification. Nevertheless, his work makes a surprising contribution to one of the most important problems of political theory: the status of what Rousseau calls “the act by which people become a people.” For Rousseau, as for Freud, a people is not first of all a collection of persons or a demographic that subsequently expresses its will. Instead, it comes into being through an act. Like the subject of the unconscious, which cannot be represented on the social stage but manifests itself only in rare, episodic and discontinuous instances of speech, “the people” eludes representation and expresses itself solely through the acts that make known its will.

What then is the nature—and above all the efficacy—of that act? The act as psychoanalysis allows us to understand it differs not only from an agenda or platform, but from the kinds of acts that political theory generally takes as its object. It is neither a sovereign act (for example a legislative act or sovereign decision) nor a popular action (a collective action or general strike), but something that acts in the subject, that leaves traces in those who are affected by it, and that lives on after he dies. More than transmitting a program, or formulating a state of affairs that it brings into being, the act is not something we can know, interpret, or anticipate, but something by which we are “struck” both psychically and in the body, where it leaves its traces or impressions. The act leaves effects in the real; it acts upon the body, and not upon the understanding alone. What then is involved in being “struck” by the act of another, and how might it help us to understand the stakes of the act for those who receive it?

Freud’s reading of Moses addresses what might be called the unconscious legacy of the act, which exceeds the frame of interpretation, embrace, or allegiance. The act is not of the order of a program or a project, but a real kernel that resists easy codification and translation. Freud describes the act as leaving a “stamp,” a kind of impression or inscription. “How,” he asks of Moses, “did one single man come to stamp his people with its definite character and determine its fate for millennia to come?” This transmission is further remarkable in being non-linear, discontinuous, distorted by repression, skipping many generations and crossing continents, but imposing itself nonetheless.

This seminar will take Freud’s work as a point of departure from which to explore the intersubjective dimension of political acts, or the way in which an act can be transmitted from one individual, or one people, to another. We will put psychoanalysis in dialogue with classical and recent works of political theory, in particular CLR James’ analysis of the complex, contrapuntal relationship between the French and Haitian Revolutions in The Black Jacobins. In exploring the transmission of the doctrine of universal emancipation from Robespierre to Toussaint L’Ouverture (and back to the French people), and the transmission of monotheism from the pharaoh Ahkenaton to the Egyptian Moses (and through him to the Jewish religion), James and Freud allow us to think about the role of a singular, subjective act in transmitting a political legacy.

In addition to key psychoanalytic texts by Freud, Lacan, and Reik, we will read major works of political philosophy by Rousseau, Benjamin, James, and Arendt and recent texts on political subjectivation by Badiou, Rancière, Zizek and others.
Veena Das, Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology and Adjunct Professor of Humanities, Johns Hopkins University
“Ordinary Ethics and Its Critics”

There is an important lineage of thought in philosophy and anthropology which renders ethics not though a specialized vocabulary corresponding to a domain of life but as woven into everyday life itself. Critics of this mode of conceptualizing ethics have argued that ethics are best demonstrated in moments of crisis when principles through which we arrive at judgments are made explicit. This mini-seminar will address these different ways of thinking of ethics and ask if moral concepts necessarily have a definitional structure? Does the crystallization of moral ideas and dispositions into a domain such as that of law, bioethics, or pedagogic principles, obscure the diffused nature of ethical dispositions and the demands they put on everyday action and expression. The discussion weaves ethnographic examples in the discussion but I argue that the example is not in the nature of an illustration of a general norm but rather shows the conceptual normativity of the particular.

Bernard E. Harcourt, Isidor and Seville Sulzbacher Professor of Law and Political Science, Columbia University; Director of the Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought; Directeur d'études, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris
“Toward a Critical Practice”

Over the past four decades at least, critical theorists have refashioned or developed new conceptual tools to grasp the world-historical shifts and the troubled times in which we find ourselves. Some have turned to the paradigm of the anthropocene, others to the concept of neoliberalism, some to new definitions of populism, and still others to concepts of precarity, biopower, necropolitics, racialized assemblages, intersectionality, and other theoretical frameworks. These critical responses have felt at times somewhat fractured, at least from the perspective of traditional critical theory, and the scarce recommendations for political action have felt somewhat unmoored, again from the perspective of traditional critical praxis. After the Arab Spring and the global Occupy movements, there was fruitful theorizing of assembly and political disobedience; but those very practices—of leaderless and ideologically-agnostic occupations, of uprisings mixed with religious faith, of standing ground, hunger strikes, or hashtags—clash with traditional notions of critical praxis.

The political situation in these troubling times has been somewhat paralyzing to traditional critical theory, and the critical responses somewhat fragmented. This seminar will attempt to set forth a vision for a renewed critical practice to address the twenty-first century. It will address the central question: In an age that may be considered post-revolutionary, at least in respect to the modern concept of revolution, how should we understand and theorize collective action and individual political engagement? What does or should political action look like when the underlying theoretical structure of the dialectical imagination has become so fractured? The seminar will draw on particular illustrations of recent critical theory and practice—such as Foucault’s involvement in the Groupe d’information sur les prisons or the global Occupy movements—in order to draw lessons about critical practice today.

“SCT is the quintessential academic experience, challenging and rewarding on both the intellectual and social levels. The connections I made during the session will stay with me for the rest of my life, and my thinking has become profoundly more complex and nuanced as a result of my encounters with the faculty and my fellow participants.”

T.J. West III, Syracuse University
Avital Ronell, University Professor of the Humanities; Professor of German, Comparative Literature, and English; Director of Poetics & Theory, New York University

“Trauma Zone – Falling Apart in Literature & Philosophy”

This seminar takes off from the circumscription of trauma zones and historical excess to consider how one shuts down or rises up against despotic regimes, institutions, friends, lovers and the rule of familial tropologies that continue to dictate our stealth moves or existential stalls. We shall explore the effects of trauma on language and narrative, including the mysterious figurations attached to pregnancy and violation in Kleist’s Marquise von O and the hysterical fantasy of male pregnancy in Freud’s famous “Rat Man” case.

In a supplementary fold we shall look at the traumatic ravishes of stupidity beginning with a close-up of Wordsworth’s poetry, “The Idiot Boy” and Hölderlin’s “Blödigkeit.” The readings engage Cathy Caruth’s important work, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History. Buckle your seat belts!

Samuel Moyn, Professor of Law and History, Yale University

“American War”

The United States, it is frequently said, is in its longest war in its history, and the endlessness of this conflict is frequently decried. How can humanists bring their various disciplinary and interdisciplinary skills to bear on this phenomenon, for the sake of grasping its novelty, and (if necessary) in the name of critique? In this mini-seminar, participants will reflect together on how historically to account for endless war, on what philosophical and legal principles have abetted or might deter the result, and on how fiction and other creative pursuits have engaged it, within the longer tradition from “The Iliad” to the present. In particular, we will ask how the transformation of the form of war – particularly the rise of a new kind of “humane” surveillance and control minimally implicating citizens directly and even conforming to rules of warfare to an unprecedented extent – has changed the role of the humanities in responding to it.
2018 Visiting Guest Lecturers

Homi Bhabha, Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities, Department of English; Director, Mahindra Humanities Center; Senior Advisor on the Humanities to the President and Provost, Harvard University
“Statelessness and Death: Reflections on the Burdened Life”

Paul Fleming, Professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature; Taylor Family Director, Society for the Humanities, Cornell University
“The Politics of Anecdotes”

Alondra Nelson, Professor, Sociology and Gender Studies, Columbia University; President, Social Science Research Council
“Moral Institutions and Racial Reconciliation after the Genome”

Sari Nusseibeh
Professor of Philosophy, Al-Quds University, Jerusalem
“Sound Minds”

Arts Quad, Cornell University Campus
Eligibility

Faculty and advanced graduate students of literature, the arts, the humanities, the related social sciences and professional studies are invited to apply. There are openings for approximately 90 participants.

Tuition

Tuition for the summer program is $3,000 (a below-cost figure made possible by a Cornell University subsidy).

The School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell has established an aid program to encourage institutional support of participants. The Matching Funds program guarantees that the School of Criticism and Theory will reduce by $300 the tuition fee for any participant whose own institution will provide $300 or more in support of his/her study. We encourage you to ask your dean or other responsible administrative officer whether it would be possible for your school to provide funding for tuition ($2,700 after the $300 reduction) or additional assistance for room and board. Any applicant requesting a Matching Funds reduction must obtain a written statement from the home institution affirming that financial support has been committed for the applicant. This letter must be received by February 1st.

In addition, there are a limited number of partial tuition scholarships available for participants with special financial needs. If you are a U.S. citizen requesting financial aid, please submit page one of your income tax return for 2016. Non-U.S. citizens should send a detailed description of their financial situation. Financial aid awards will be announced at the same time as notice of admission.

Advance Course Registration

To enable the School to plan the summer schedule, prospective participants must indicate on the online application form which of the six-week courses they wish to attend in order of preference. Upon admission to the School, participants will be notified of their course assignment; acceptance of the offer of admission to the School will constitute acceptance of that course assignment. All participants are enrolled in each of the mini-seminars.

Accommodations

For those participants who bring families or prefer to live off-campus, the Off-Campus Living Office at Cornell can provide a listing of summer rentals and sublets. The phone number for the Housing Office is 607-255-2310 and the website is http://dos.cornell.edu/off-campus-living.

Many participants prefer to take advantage of on-campus housing which provides an opportunity for intellectual interaction within the group. Information about on-campus and off-campus housing will be distributed to all admitted participants in the spring.

“SCT was a reminder of why I had joined academia in the first place, to become part of a dynamic intellectual community committed to the exchange of ideas.”

Jennifer Spitzer, Ithaca College

Beebe Lake Trail, Cornell University Campus
Library Facilities

Cornell University has one of the largest university libraries, with extensive collections in specialized fields. Participants will find that their research needs will be more than adequately answered by the library’s resources. Participants will be issued library cards giving them full use of all university libraries. They will also be able to access the Cornell time-sharing computing system at various locations.

Recreation Facilities

Cornell University has a variety of indoor and outdoor recreational facilities that will be available for the SCT participants’ use. Facility rates vary. Information will be available at registration.

Instructions for Applying

Applicants must submit all application materials online. The online application for the 2018 summer session will be available by December 1, 2017. The application deadline is February 1, 2018, and admissions decisions are announced in March.

Applicants will be asked to submit the following materials:

1. An application form.

2. A statement of no more than two pages describing current scholarly interests and plans and how the School of Criticism and Theory might further those interests and plans. The statement should include information about courses taken and/or taught in criticism and theory.

3. A current curriculum vitae.

4. A sample of recent writing.

5. A transcript (for current graduate students).

As part of the application process, applicants will be asked to request confidential letters of recommendation from two referees, who should send the letters directly to the application site.

Acceptances and Deposits

Applicants who have been admitted will have ten days from the date of notification in which to submit a non-refundable $200 deposit against tuition in order to hold their place in the School. The remainder of tuition is due on May 15, 2018.

Contact Information

For application and program information:
http://sct.cornell.edu/

e-mail: sctcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu
phone: 607-255-9276

The School of Criticism and Theory
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A.D. White House Garden, site of SCT receptions

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