

AR317 Critical Fabulation

Seminar Leader: Clio Nicastro

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Course Times: Mon & Wed 10:45-12:15

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

What happens when cinema tries to recover and “repair” stories that have never been entirely told – due to the lack of archival material and witnesses, or because they belong to minoritized groups, or are simply considered inexplicable? And what if, in fact, repairing does not mean to fill the gaps, to seize and freeze a past event but rather to intentionally fail in reconstructing a history of violence, injustice and domination? In the article “Venus in two acts” (2008), Saidiya Hartman wrestles with the erasure of the murders of two women on a slave ship crossing the infamous Middle Passage. With the method of “critical fabulation”, Hartman proposes a reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history in order “to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling,” to reconstruct “what could have been.” This temporality at the fictional crossroads between past and future wants to impede a cathartic experience in the spectator, pointing out how the aftermaths of that story still affect the present. By following Hartman’s research method, this course will look at films that combine different genres and styles (documentary, historical, supernatural) to challenge the unidirectional linear representation of marginalized stories and characters. We will watch and discuss, among others, *Atlantics* (Mati Diop, 2019), *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (Harun Farocki, 1991), *The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2015), *Yella* (Christian Petzold 2007).

Requirements

Preparing for class involves reading thoughtfully and engaging with the set text for each class, for instance, by thinking through the argument of a particular section and taking notes while reading. Try to formulate and address questions before you come to class: What is the argument being made by the author? What terms recur throughout the text? How does it relate to other texts we have read on the course? If you find a particular section difficult to understand underline unfamiliar terms and try to ask yourself what specifically is unclear (don’t worry if you find the texts difficult or if you are not familiar with all the references; remember it is always possible that the author is being unclear or contradictory).

Students are expected to participate actively in class (*see below special consideration for fall 2020). The purpose of the class is to come to a better understanding of it through collective discussion. Students are therefore encouraged to ask questions as well as making statements in class. The texts will be uploaded every week on google classroom. Students are asked to bring paper copies of the reading to class and to not use laptops. The use of electronic devices during class time is only allowed for disability accommodation. If you have a disability accommodation, please inform your instructor at the beginning of the course.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Syllabi should note that, instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Regular attendance and active participation are essential to the success of this course. Attendance at ALL classes is expected. Missing more than two 90--minute sessions in a semester will reduce the course grade by up to one grade step (e.g., B+ to B). Late arrival or leaving during class time will count as an absence. Missing more than 30% of all sessions may result in failing the course. Consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FALL 2020:

If you cannot attend class because of COVID-19 restrictions, online alternatives will be provided, e.g. remote participation and/or asynchronous options for those who currently live in a time zone that is incompatible with the schedule of the seminar. As I believe it is important to give all students the same information for them to decide whether they are interested in the seminar, I will be available for an individual introductory meeting. During any online session it is strongly encouraged to have your camera on. We will try to make up for the physical distance through assignment that facilitate class discussion when students are not doing it at the same time.

Assessment

The assessment will be made on the basis of two essays and class participation (See 'Grade Breakdown' and 'Essay Deadlines' below).

Assignments

The deadlines for all writing assignments can be found under 'Essay deadlines.'

Essays: The midterm essay (2000 words) responds to a thematic question and should represent your understanding of one aspect of the course reading. The Final essay (2500 words) is expected to be more ambitious and somewhat longer, trying to develop a more comprehensive account of a particular conceptual question or topic you will have encountered during the course and drawing on a wider range of sources.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Classroom participation: 30%

Midterm Essay: 30%

Final Essay: 40%

Schedule

Week 1 Introduction

Monday, August 31 – Introduction to the course, presentation of the syllabus // Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts* (2008)

Wednesday, September 2 – Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts* (2008)

Week 2 Another kind of Empathy

Monday, September 7 – Excerpt from Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997)

Wednesday, September 9 – Excerpt from Saidiya Hartman “Innocent Amusements” from *Scenes of Subjection* (1997)

Week 3 Another kind of Empathy

Monday, September 14 – On Aristotle’s notion of ‘Catharsis’

Wednesday, September 16 – Jacques Rivette, *On Abjection* (1961)

Week 4 Bodies, empathy, and Temporality

Monday, September 21 – Excerpt from Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (1985)

Wednesday, September 23 – Excerpt from Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)

Week 5 The Future Behind

Monday, September 28 – Sami Shalk, “Metaphor and Materiality, Disability and Neo – Slave Narratives” in *Bodyminds Reimagined. (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (2018)

Wednesday, September 30 – Sami Shalk, “The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future,” in *Bodyminds Reimagined. (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (2018)

Week 6 The Future Behind

Monday, October 5 – Ovid, “The Death of Eurydice” in *Metamorphoses*

Wednesday, October 7 – *Atlantics* (2019, Mati Diop)

Week 7 Future Tense

Monday, October 12 – Excerpt from Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2018)

Wednesday, October 14 – Excerpt from Tina M. Campt *Listening to Images* (2017)

Week 8

Monday, October 19 – Sunday, October 25 - Fall Break

Week 9 Contagious Gestures

Monday, October 26 – *The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2015)

Wednesday, October 28 – Rizvana Bradley, *Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion* (2018)

Week 10 The Power of Narrative

Monday, November 2 – Excerpt from bell hooks, *Black Looks, race and representations* (1992)

Wednesday, November 4 – Excerpt from Hanna Meretoja, Colin Davis, *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (2008)

Week 11 The Power of Narrative

Monday, November 9 – Excerpt from Hanna Meretoja, Colin Davis, *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (2008)

Wednesday, November 11 – *Yella* (Christian Petzold, 2007)

Week 12 Empathy and Memory

Monday, November 16 – Excerpt from Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012)

Wednesday, November 18 – Excerpt from Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012)

Week 13 Images which are not there yet

Monday, November 23 – Screening: *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (Harun Farocki, 1989)

Wednesday, November 25 – Harun Farocki, *Reality Would Have to Begin* (1988)

Week 14 Images which are not there yet

Monday, November 30 - Harun Farocki, *Reality Would Have to Begin* (1988)

Wednesday, December 2 – On Walter Benjamin's notion of 'readability'

Week 15

Monday, December 7 – Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby:" *A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha*. Nancy N. Chen (1992)

Wednesday, December 9 – Recap and final remarks

Completion week

Monday, December 14 – Wednesday, December 16

Essay Deadlines

Midterm Essay: Due October 17, 23:59

Final Essay: Due December 18, 23:59