

## **COURSE ID - LT120 Introduction to Critical and Cultural Theory**

Seminar Leader: Dr Clio Nicastro

Course Times: Tues and Thurs 9.00-10.30

Email: c.nicastro@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: by appointment

Room: Seminar Room 2 P98

### **Course Description**

This course will introduce students to key concepts and methodological approaches from different traditions of Cultural Studies and Critical Theory, including feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism, and black studies. The seminar will cover “canonized” as well as less known thinkers: Theodor Adorno, Gloria Anzaldua, Silvia Federici, Michel Foucault, Max Horkheimer, David Graeber, Saidiya Hartman.

Through a close reading of a selection of texts and film excerpts, we will delve into the issue of human subjectivity and its social, institutional, and political arrangement. With this in mind, the seminar will investigate how socio-political historical processes involved in the constitution of subjectivities are often perceived as “natural.” We will explore the positions from which a subject (can/is allowed to?) speak, act, express herself, we will observe how the production of determinate meaning may simultaneously exclude the emergence of others. How do individuals become accomplices to their own subjugation? How do they introject forms of domination?

In order to reflect on these questions, we will explore a crucial topic within the framework of Critical Theory: Enlightenment. Our discussion will span from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "Dialectic of Enlightenment" to Silvia Federici's "The Caliban and the Witch," and extend to the more recent work "The Dawn of Everything" by David Graeber and David Wengrow. In the second part of the seminar, we will also look at explorations of irrational forms of belief and practice in critical theory, and how these have been creatively opposed to the traditions of “Enlightenment” across cultural and countercultural contexts.

\*What does it mean for a text to be ‘accessible’? This important question will be addressed during the seminar – but we will discuss this issue not only as critical ‘readers’, by comparing the different styles of the authors we encounter, but also as ‘writers’: from a perspective of producers of text.

### **Requirements**

#### **Class preparation**

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. 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 highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. 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**

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

### **Assessment**

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

### **Writing 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 (3000 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**

The following policy from the Student Handbook on the submission of essays applies to this course: essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded 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 and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

You are welcome to make an appointment with the instructor to discuss essay assignments and feedback during office hours.

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

### **Grade Breakdown**

Participation (including presentations): 30%

Midterm Essay: 30%

Final Essay: 40%

### **Schedule**

#### **Week 1: The Frankfurter School**

Tuesday, January 30: Introduction to the course, presentation of the syllabus.

Excerpt from Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Gretel Karplus, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947); Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (1784); Mendelssohn, Moses, *On the Question: What Is Enlightenment* (1784)

Thursday, February 1: Excerpt from Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Gretel Karplus, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947); Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (1784); Mendelssohn, Moses, *On the Question: What Is Enlightenment* (1784)

#### **Week 2: The Frankfurter School**

Tuesday, February 6: Excerpt from Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Gretel Karplus, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947); Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (1784); Mendelssohn, Moses, *On the Question: What Is Enlightenment* (1784)

Thursday, February 8: Excerpt from Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1951)

**Week 3: Foucault**

Tuesday, February 13: Michel Foucault, *What Is Critique?* (1978) – *What is Enlightenment?* (1984)

Thursday, February 15: Michel Foucault, *The Subject and Power* (1982)

**Week 4: Tremble, Tremble”! The witches are back**

Tuesday, February 22: Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1988) pp. 199-220.

Thursday, February 23: Excerpt from Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (2004)

**Week 5: Whose Enlightenment?**

Tuesday, February 27: Excerpt from Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (2004)

Thursday, February 29: Excerpt from David Graeber, David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021)

**Week 6: Whose Enlightenment?**

Tuesday, March 5: Excerpt from David Graeber, David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021)

Tuesday, March 7: Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in two Acts* (2008)

**Week 7: Whose Enlightenment?**

Tuesday, March 12: Saidiya Hartman, Excerpt from *Lose your mother* (2006)

Thursday, March 14: Gloria Anzaldua, Excerpt from *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting, Identity Spirituality, Reality* (2015)

**Week 8: Whose Enlightenment?**

Tuesday, March 19: Justin E. H. Smith, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason* (2020)

Thursday, March 21: Midterm assignment draft revision

**Spring Break**

**Week 9: Some reflections on astrology**

Tuesday, April 2: no class

Thursday, April 4: Excerpt from Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and other essays on the irrational in culture*

**Week 10: Film Screening**

Tuesday, April 9: Excerpt from Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and other essays on the irrational in culture*

Wednesday, April 10: Screening of Maya Schweizer's films + Q&A (in collaboration with Janina Schabig and Dorothea Von Hantelmann) **7-9 pm Lecture Hall**

Thursday, April 11: No class

**Week 11: Some reflections on astrology**

Tuesday, April 16: Walter Benjamin, *On the Mimetic Faculty + On Astrology* (1927-1934)

Thursday, April 18: Johanna Hedve, *Sick Woman Theory* (2020);  
<https://www.caresyllabus.org/johanna-hedva-care-syllabus-interview>

**Week 12: Reproduction and technology**

Tuesday, April 23: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935)

Thursday, April 25: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935)

**Week 13: Reproduction and technology**

Monday, April 29: Screening of a selection of films by Harun Farocki and Artur Jafa (in collaboration with Dorothea Von Hantelmann)

Tuesday, April 30: no class

Thursday, May 1: Excerpt from Heike Behrend et al., *Trance Mediums and New Media: Spirit Possession in the Age of Technical Reproduction* (2014)

**Week 14:**

Tuesday, May 6: Federal Holiday

Thursday, May 8: Final assignment draft revision

**13-17 completion week**

Midterm Essay: Sunday Apr 2, 23:59

Final Essay: Sunday May 14, 23:59