Seminar with Professor Elissa Marder (4.5 ECTS credits)
Division of Philosophy, Art and Critical Thought
August Session / August 15-17, 2016

Primal Scenes: Sexuality, Photography and the Limits of the Human

Course Description:

In this course, we shall examine how the notion of the ‘primal scene’ undermines a purely human understanding of human experience, and challenges traditional conceptions of temporality, repetition, sexuality and desire, writing, mourning, the concept of life, and the status of the historical event. According to Freud, in a formulation that has often been underplayed or misunderstood, dreams are not simply mental images, but rather psychic productions—or scenes. Every dream scene is motivated by an enactment of the very images, ideas or concepts that remain undisclosed within it. The dream work labors to dramatize the very things that it cannot say or tell. Dreams are not images, but theatrical spectacles, events. Beginning with an examination of Hesiod’s rendition of the Pandora myth as the determining event in the invention of the human, alongside Freud’s foundational work with two of his exemplary female patients (“Irma” from The Interpretation of Dreams and the anonymous protagonist of his 1915 “Counter-Case” of feminine paranoia), and Benjamin’s writings on Baudelaire and photography, we shall explore how femininity, sexuality, and media technology converge to establish and challenge the category of the human.

Course Objective: This course will provide students with a nuanced familiarity with some of the most important writings of Freud, Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin. Furthermore, the course will create connections between visual technology (photography in particular), temporality and figuration.

Learning Outcomes: This course is designed to teach students to engage in deconstructive close readings of works by Freud, Baudelaire, and Benjamin. It aims to make students more attentive and more critical to their own presuppositions about the operations involved in reading and interpretation. By attending to deconstructive and psychoanalytic theories of language and figuration, students will gain a better sense of how and why deconstructive close readings challenge interpretative norms in philosophy, psychoanalysis, visual analysis, and literary criticism.
I: Counter-Fire: Femininity, Technology and the Invention of the Human (Dora and Pandora)
Required Readings:
“Pandora” episodes in Theogony and Works and Days, Hesiod

II. Interpretation of Dreams: Translation and Transmission

The Interpretation of Dreams: Chapter 2, “Specimen Dream and “Irma” and the opening part of chapter 6 and Sections A & B.

Suggested Readings:
Freud, “Fragments of an Analysis (Dora)” (1905)
Freud, “Screen Memories”

III: Primal Scenes: Wolf Man (Parts 1-IV)
Required Reading:
Freud, Sigmund. From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (Wolf Man). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919) 1-60 and final footnote on 121. (also can be found in collection called Three Case Histories).

Suggested Reading:
Freud, Sigmund. “Recollection, Repetition and Working Through (1914)”
Freud, Sigmund. “Constructions in Analysis” (1938)
Freud, Sigmund. “Analysis Terminable and Interminable (1937)”

IV: Primal Fantasies: Femininity, Fixation, and Photography
Required Reading:

Further Reading:
Three Essays in Sexuality
**Please note: These texts can all be found in the paperback collection: Sexuality and the Psychology of Love

V: Baudelaire & Benjamin: Baudelaire’s (Photographic) Afterlife
Required Reading:


“Au Lecteur” (“To the Reader”)
“A une passante” (“To a Passer-by”)
“Le Cygne” (“The Swan”)
Additional suggested readings:
“Spleen II”
“Rêve Parisien” (“Parisian Dream”)

VI: Baudelaire and Benjamin: Erfahrung und Erlebnis (Widows, Photographs, Crowds)

Required Readings:
Benjamin, Walter. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” V, VI and first paragraph of VIII


Baudelaire, Charles:
“A une passante” (“To A Woman Passing By”)
“Le Cygne” (“The Swan”)

Baudelaire, Charles.
Prose poems:
The Widows” (“Les Veuves”); “Crowds” (“Les Foules”); “Mademoiselle Bistouri” (“Miss Scalpel”);
“The Cord” (“La Corde”)
