POSTMODERN CRITICAL THEORY:
FROM PHENOMOLOGY TO PSYCHOANALYSIS:
BODY, LANGUAGE, DESIRE, AND IDEALOGY:

Spring Term, 2014

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

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Offices Hours:
• Monday: 3:00 – 4:00
• Tuesday: 10:30 – 11:30
• Thursday: 10:30 – 11:30
• By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
The course title itemizes four different themes: body, language, desire, and ideology. Inheriting 17th-Century Cartesian dualism, we characteristically keep the body – a physical, material, causally determined object – and language – a social, psychological, cultural, and cognitive capacity – at arm’s length, muting matter, disembodying language, and accepting an odd, ill-fitting, two-tiered assembly. A core thesis of postmodern critical theory is, first, that the body is “linguistically constructed” and, second, that language is “materialized power,” interlacing mundane bodily movement with linguistic articulation so tightly that the one is inextricable from the other. Inheriting 19th-century Romanticism, we characteristically keep desire – personal, secret, individual, and erotic – and ideology – impersonal, public, general, and political – at arm’s length, domiciling desire in the interior space of the yearning heart (romanticism), domesticating ideology in the exterior space of public places (sociological objectivism), and therein accepting an odd two-place assembly of private and public. Another core thesis of postmodern critical theory is that public power colonizes personal desire and that erotic strivings are employees of regional administration. To oversimplify drastically, postmodern critical theory is largely defined as a commitment to conceptualizing social power in terms of these four conceptually interwoven concepts. We will address these four themes by associating them with historically staggered schools of thought: Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body), Saussure’s structuralism (language), Lacan’s psychoanalysis (desire), and Foucault’s archaeology (ideology). A special emphasis of the course is a renegotiation of the standard interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body as superseded and remained by Lacan’s structuralist psychoanalysis of desire. Against this view, I will argue that the later works of both theorists offer a remarkable point of potential convergence.

Accordingly, we will explore the famous rift in 20th-century French philosophy between Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who developed a phenomenology of human embodiment, and Jacques Lacan, who developed a linguistically oriented psychoanalytic account of desire and the unconscious. For both thinkers, the locus of human subjectivity is embodied, interactive, discursive agency. Both developed Post-Freudian accounts of human embodiment, recognizable sociality, and desire, and both believed that they captured the best insights of the others. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty worried that Lacan’s focus upon the linguistic structuration of human subjectivity abstracted from human embodiment, while Lacan worried that Merleau-Ponty did not understand fully how language is constitutive of human subjectivity. It’s only
in the works of Jean Laplanche and Slavoj Zizek that one sees how the philosophy of embodied perception – Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology – and the psychoanalysis of linguistic intersubjectivity – Lacan’s structuralism – connect up. Laplanche and Zizek provide us with the conceptual resources for understanding the terms of their debate. Emphasizing the three fundamental “registers” or dimensions of human subjectivity – imaginary, symbolic, and real – Laplanche and Zizek allow us to see how Merleau-Ponty develops a theory of language (symbolic) within a theory of perception (imaginary), while Lacan develops a theory of perception (imaginary/real) out of a theory of language (symbolic).

A persistent and guiding theme of the course is human desire. In both phenomenology and psychoanalytic structuralism, desire is not a particular state or attitude of the individual. Instead, it’s the constitutive condition of human co-existence. Both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan are thoroughly steeped in Heidegger’s hermeneutic analysis of being-in-the-world – his Daseinanalytik – which analyzes human existence as an openness upon, aperture to, or bond with the world. For Heidegger, infants become human by taking over shared, anonymous, typified ways of handling or coping with situations. Human life consists in active, practically oriented, embodied, and caring engagements with the world, where such practices function to “disclose” the world from quite specific, involved, articulated viewpoints. Both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan take up Heidegger’s analysis of thrownness – Geworfenheit – in their early accounts of perception, which Lacan called the “mirror stage” and Merleau-Ponty called “the body image.”

At this stage of their work, they share the basic idea that humans grasp or identify themselves environmentally and intercorporeally in perceptually available, practically aligned, and ecstatically attuned perceptual gestalts that “reflect” or “mirror” one’s “ego” (moi) or sense of self. At this stage in their works, both develop conceptions of the unconscious or “unthought” as that which is foreclosed by this perceptual-pragmatic structure of the engaged, socially attuned self. In their later works, both develop conceptions of language acquisition – Merleau-Ponty in The Visible and the Invisible and Lacan in his famous later seminars – and both continued to think of human desire and the unconscious as linguistically structured.

We will explore the extent to which their early and later accounts of human desire are much more compatible than either presumed of the other.

A central issue inextricably interwoven with all four themes of the course – body, language, desire, and ideology – is sexual difference. Contemporary debates about gender tend to assume a biology/culture duality: sex is a biological category, while sexuality is a cultural category. Sexuality – whether hetero-, homo-, or transgendered – lies on the cultural side of the equation: that is, as a culturally inscribed and socially performed interpretation of desire. Sex, in contrast, is considered to be a sharp biological category focused on the physiological formation of genitalia. Refinements of this standard nature/nature duality come in two forms. First, biology does not at all work with a static and sharp dichotomy between two sexes, male and female, but, instead, with a complex and variably marked continuum hinging on chromosomal and in utero chemical and endocrinological variables in the maturation of the fetus. Second, cultural interpretations and social practices are not elective or wholly arbitrary – that is, a matter of conscious choice – because such cultural contents and social rituals define the formation of subjectivity as such. Lacan is unique in this regard because sexual difference is located at neither the biological nor the cultural level of analysis. He insists that this nature/nurture duality misses the phenomenon of sexual differentiation, which is a structural difference brought about by the human acquisition of language, where the assumption of language lies between species-specific biology differences, at one extreme, and the apparently open-ended and variable cultural contents and social practices, on the other. In short, for Lacan, the infant assumes sexual difference, not as a matter of either biological determination or specific cultural indoctrination, but instead as a matter of a differential placement in, and relation to, language. The structural differentiation between masculine and feminine subject positions postdates biology, because it is now symbolically mediated, and predates the specific form of enculturation, which plays out sexual difference in the particular registers of a specific socio-cultural milieu. For Lacan, sexual difference consists in opposing ways in which human beings are oriented within language as such – different ways in which assumes one’s subjectivity as a speaking being.

Moreover, for Lacan, sexual difference introduces a constitutive tension, an inbuilt antagonism within the lives of speaking beings (parle’etre), and this constitutive agon of linguistically mediated interaction has become an important dimension of the distinctive form of ideology critique practiced by such postmodernists as Foucault, Derrida, Althusser, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Kristeva, and others. A good deal of postmodern critical theory emphasizes, along with Lacan, the naiveté of traditional Western philosophy, which seems to presuppose a gender-neutral conceptualization of human subjectivity.

Throughout the course, films will be shown alongside texts as aesthetic companions. Students
will be encouraged to use the films in their papers. Moreover, students will be encouraged to individualize a final research paper tailored to their particular interests.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

- Fink, Bruce.  
  - “Reading ‘The Subversion of the Subject’,” from *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely*.

**BACKGROUND TEXTS:**

- **PSYCHOANALYSIS:**

- **SLAVOJ ZIZEK:**
2004).

FILMS:

- The Five Senses (Jeremy Podeswa, 1999)
- Flawless Joel (Joel Schumacher, 1999).
- La Femme Nikita (Luc Besson, 1990)
- Body Double (Brian De Palma, 1984)
- Crash (David Cronenberg, 1996 [based upon J. G. Ballard's 1973 novel])
- The Pervert's Guide to Cinema (scripted and presented by Slavoj Žižek and directed by Sophie Fiennes)
- Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, 2001).

READING SCHEDULE

FALL TERM:

Part One: Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of the Body and the Critique of Cartesian Dualism:

Week One
- Tuesday: Introduction to French phenomenology and its Poststructuralist’s Aftermath.
- Wednesday Evening Movie: The Five Senses.
- Thursday:
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings, Editor’s Introduction (1-33).
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings, Prospectus (33-43).
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings, The Body (63-126).

Weak Two
- Tuesday:
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings, The World as Perceived (126-145).
- Wednesday Evening Movie: Flawless.
- Thursday:

Week Three
- Tuesday:
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings, The Algorithm and the Mystery of Language (234-247)
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings, The Crisis of Understanding (325-346)
- Wednesday Evening Movie: La Femme Nikita.
- Thursday:
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings, The Intertwining – The Chiasm, from The Visible and Invisible (247-272)
  - Review.
Lacan’s Structuralist Challenge to Phenomenology and Hermeneutics:

Week Four
- Tuesday:
  - *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Part One: Structure: Alienation and the Other (3-35)
- **Wednesday Evening Movie:** *Crash.*
- Thursday:
  - *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Part Two: The Lacanian Subject (35-83)

Week Five
- Tuesday:
- Thursday:

Laplanche’s Reinterpretation of Freud’s Seduction Hypothesis and the Radicalization of the Copernican Turn to Otherness: The Sociality of Human Drive (*Trieb*):

Week Six
- Tuesday:
  - *Essays in Otherness*, Editor’s Introduction (1-51)
- **Wednesday Evening Movie:** *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema: Part Two.*
- Thursday:
  - *Essays in Otherness*, The Unfinished Copernican Revolution (52-84).

Week Seven
- Tuesday:
  - *Essays in Otherness*, Interpretation between Determinism and Hermeneutics (138-166).
- **Wednesday Evening Movie:** *Mulholland Drive.*
- Thursday:

Deepening the Copernican Turn: Kant & Hegel After Lacan:

Week Eight
- Tuesday:
- Thursday:

Week Nine
- Tuesday:
- Thursday:

Week Ten
• Tuesday:
  o *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “Not Only as Substance, but Also as Subjects?” (201-233).
  o Thursday:
    ▪ Review
    ▪ Student Evaluations.

**Finals Week**