POSTMODERN CRITICAL THEORY:
FROM PHENOMOLOGY TO STRUCTURALISM:
BODY AND LANGUAGE AS THE DESIRE OF THE OTHER:
Spring Term, 2011

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

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Offices Hours:
· Monday: 1:00 – 3:00
· Tuesday: 10:30 – 11:30
· Thursday: 10:30 – 11:30
· By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In this course 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 the unconscious. For both thinkers, the locus of human subjectivity is embodied, interactive, discursive agency. Both developed Post-Freudian accounts of human embodiment, recognitive 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 erotically 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.

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:


**BACKGROUND TEXTS:**

**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).

**Week 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)
- Thursday:
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**: *La Femme Nikita.*
- 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)
- 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**: *The Silence of the Lambs.*
- Thursday:

Deepening the Copernican Turn: Kant & Hegel After Lacan:

Week Eight

- Tuesday:
  - *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, *Cogito*: The Void Called Subject (9-45).
  - Thursday:
    - *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, *Cogito* and Sexual Difference (45-83).

Week Nine

- Tuesday:
  - *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, On Radical Evil and
Related Matters (83-125).

- Thursday:
  o *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Hegel “Logic of Essence” as a Theory of Ideology (125-15).

**Week Ten**

- Tuesday:
  o *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, “The Wound is Healed Only by the Spear that Smote You” (165-200).
  o Thursday:
    § Review
    § Student Evaluations.

**Finals Week**