GERM-GA2222 Topics in 20th Century German Culture

THE MELODRAMATIC IMAGINATION:
THEORY, LITERATURE, & FILM

2 credits | R 2:00 — 4:45pm | Elisabeth Bronfen
Meets September 1 — 30 | Fall 2022 | In English

The painful contradictions between personal desire and social conventions are as much the stuff of melodramatic imagination as is the histrionic display of grand passions. Even while the sensationalism, which this genre taps into, is meant to appeal to the affects of the readers or spectators, the anti-realism on which it is predicated makes use of aesthetically intricate formalizations to speak to the entanglement between personal and collective fantasy and its discontent. As Peter Brooks puts it, melodrama represents “a victory over repression”. In this seminar we will begin our discussion with an array of theoretical texts, to be followed by close analysis of two modern novellas (Arthur Schnitzler, Henry James). In a second step we will turn to the contradictory deployment of political passions in the Singspiel in Nazi Germany and its cinematic representation (Detlev Sierck, Rainer Werner Fassbinder). In a third step, we will turn to a series of melodramas that revisit Douglas Sirk’s mastery of this genre in 1950s Hollywood, both in queer cinema (Tod Haynes), in new German cinema (Rainer Werner Fassbinder), and in the Berlin school (Christian Petzold).
Starting with a detailed discussion of its Introduction and Division One, this seminar will offer an integral and close reading of Martin Heidegger’s 1927 magnum opus *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)* against the background of its historical and philosophical origins and context, including its immediate reception at the time. Special attention will be paid to Heidegger’s use, critique, and betrayal of his teacher Edmund Husserl. The seminar further aims to bring not only phenomenological, hermeneutic, neo-Marxist, and deconstructive but also analytic, notably epistemological and pragmatist, arguments and methods (next to insights and perspectives drawn from ordinary language philosophy and moral perfectionism) to bear upon the late 20th and early 21st century reception and undiminished significance of this modern classic.
Although Kant and Goethe held each other in high esteem, they were antipodes in their philosophical positions. What for Goethe was the highest form of human cognition - intuitive judgment or intuitive understanding - for Kant was "a phantom," "something of which we should not understand what it is, even if someone were in a position to tell us." According to Kant, only discursive thought is humanly possible. In this seminar, we will examine the reasons for their respective positions and try to bring Kant and Goethe into a dialogue. Selected Readings from: Kant, Critique of Pure Reason. Transl. Guyer and Wood. Cambridge UP. Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment. Transl. Guyer and Matthews. Cambridge UP. Goethe, The Metamorphosis of Plants. Introduction and Photography by Gordon L. Miller. Goethe, Scientific Studies. Transl. by Douglas Miller. Suhrkamp Publishers New York 1988. Spinoza, The Ethics (Parts One and Five).
Against the backdrop of recent theories of ecocriticism and the anthropocene, this seminar inquires into literary forms of ecological thinking. Instead of the traditional topos of literature as an “imitation of nature,” the course proceeds from theories that think “ecology without nature” (Morton). In this context, a fruitful approach can be found in “scale critique” (Woods), which frames the anthropocene as a problem of scale. Insofar as humanity has become a “geological force,” “human agency” can no longer only be thought “over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (Chakrabarty). Rather, humanity experiences a radical decentering. Timothy Clark designates the heterogeneity of scales in the anthropocene as “scale effects.” “Scale effects” are of manifold interest for the theory of representation, for not only do they withdraw themselves from visibility and representation, but they also entail “spectral agencies.” What kind of “scale effects” are at work in literary ecologies, or eco-scenarios? What kind of “derangements of scale,” what incommensurabilities, discontinuities, heterotopias, fault lines, latencies, and serialities does literature bring onto the stage, thereby posing a challenge not only to ecological thinking, but also to literary representation? The spectrum of ecological scenarios is broad, ranging from micrologies to the rupturing of dams and of frames, from postapocalyptic scenarios to eco-horror and “the environmental uncanny” (Ghosh). Readings include texts by Adalbert Stifter, Theodor Storm, H.P. Lovecraft, Arno Schmidt, Thomas Bernhard, Marlen Haushofer, Max Frisch, Peter Handke, Don DeLillo, Raoul Schrott, Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton and others. The course will be taught in German.
Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995) has provoked intense conversations among archivists, philosophers, historians, psychoanalysts, and social scientists about the archive and its relation to questions of memory. This seminar is an attempt to approach this difficult text. The course will have three components: first, readings of the Freudian texts that underlie Derrida’s work, including *Totem and Taboo*, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad,” and *Moses and Monotheism*. Second, fully armed, we will read Archive Fever itself. Finally, we will explore several modern cultural projects or fields of inquiry that reflect on the concept of the archive.