

Interpretation as Cultural Practice

BTP2NA_T_15

Time and Venue

Wednesday 8.00-9.40

Venue: Mblg. 54

Instructor

Csató Péter

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Office hours

Monday 12.00-13.00

Tuesday 14.00-15.00

Course goal and general requirements

This interdisciplinary course focuses on the ubiquitous act of interpretation in an attempt to reflect upon the complex and problematic nature of interpretive processes and the constitutive role they play in various cultural discourses. The course addresses issues of literary and cultural theory as well as their philosophical background, and investigates how these issues relate to various cultural practices. Besides theory, our inquiries will be extended to include the problem of interpretability in painting, film and music. The course material comprises texts by St. Augustine, Herman Melville, Susan Sontag, Clifford Geertz, Stanley Fish, E.D. Hirsch, Jorge Luis Borges, Michel Foucault and others. The non-literary material to be discussed includes Diego Velasquez's famous painting, *Las Meninas*, and Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2001).

Requirements for a grade

Active participation in class discussion Active participation in class discussions is essential and will have a mighty influence on one's grade. The individual seminars are designed to address particular problems concerning the problematic of essentialism that arise from various discourses we focus on. Several of these questions may incite controversies, and you are all welcome to take your stances in relation to the given problem at hand and engage in debate.

Regular class attendance

Regular attendance is required: more than three absences will result in "no grade" for the course. Since at the end of the semester you will be tested on your knowledge of the assigned texts and the material covered, it is not a good idea to skip classes and readings, because doing so might severely lessen your chances of understanding what comes subsequently. Should you happen to miss a class for whatever emergency, I am happy to consult anyone on the assigned texts in my office hours or at an appointed time.

End-term test

The end-term test will measure your knowledge of the texts covered during the semester, and your comprehension of the problems that we will have discussed. It will be evaluated on a "pass-or-fail" basis, and will serve as an entry to your assignment for a grade. The pass limit is 60%, and in case of failure you cannot run for a grade.

Presentation

Students will be assigned to implement a critical project of their own, exploring and analyzing either conflicting theories of interpretation or different interpretations of literary or cinematic texts, TV shows, etc. not covered in class. Students will be given a list of theoretical texts for preparation.

SCHEDULE

Week 1 – Introduction

Week 2 – *Culture and interpretation*

Clifford Geertz. “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.” In: *The Interpretation of Cultures*. NY: Basic, 1973. 3-30.

Week 3 – *The limits of interpretation: two approaches*

Umberto Eco: “Overinterpreting Texts”

Richard Rorty: “The Pragmatist’s Progress”

In: *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Stefan Collini ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.

Week 4 – *Understanding the sacred*

Selections from **St. Augustine’s** *On Christian Doctrine*

Week 5 – *Which one to believe?—Two approaches to Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener”*

Donald Fiene: “Bartleby the Christ”

J. Hillis Miller: “Who is Bartleby”

Week 6 – *Identity as fiction*

Philip Roth: *The Counterlife* (1986)

Week 7 – FALL BREAK

Week 8 – *Movie session*

Christopher Nolan: *Memento* (2001)

Week 9 – *How real is reality?*

Jorge Luis Borges: “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” In: *Labyrinths*. NY: New Directions, 1964.

Catherine Belsey: “What’s Real?” In: *Culture and the Real*. London: Routledge, 2005. 1-19.

Week 10 – *The painting as text*

Michel Foucault: “Las Meninas” (Introduction to *The Order of Things*)

Week 11 – *Musical interpretation*

Charles Ives: *The Unanswered Question*

John Cage. 4’33’’; *Imaginary Landscape No 5; Four Solos For Voice*

Week 13 – Presentations

Week 12 – Presentations

Week 14 – End-term test