

MPhil in Criticism & Culture

Optional course, Lent term 2018: Figure and ground in the long 20th century

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‘Murphy, all life is figure and ground’.

‘But a wandering to find home,’ said Murphy.

(Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*)

In *The Optical Unconscious* Rosalind E. Krauss defines ‘the modernist not-ground’ as ‘a field or background that has risen to the surface of the work to become exactly coincident with its foreground, a field that is thus ingested by the work as figure’. Hers is one way of describing an experience – Beckett’s is another – created by a negotiation common to very many works of literature, music and visual art produced from the late nineteenth century onwards. You can see it, for example, in the way that Degas pushes his human figures to the side of his compositions, making you wonder where to look first; you can hear it when regular motifs in free verse present striking regularity against non-poetic disorder, which you could at the same time hear as new rhythms breaking away from familiar metres. But it’s also involved in Gertrude Stein’s prose, in Duchamp’s Readymades, in the gestures of Yvonne Rainer’s dance pieces, and in all works which play with repetition, chance and randomness, pattern and plotlessness; it’s an important part of the ‘archaeological imagination’ Kitty Hauser sees in 1930s Britain, what Christopher Hight has called ‘the discourse around the human figure prevalent between the late 1940s and the early 1960s in many parts of Europe and America’, and of the continuing rise of documentary forms during this period. It animates the very wide range of work concerned with what has come to be termed ‘the everyday’ and is crucial to this period’s thinking about aesthetic form, perceptual psychology and political engagement.

This matter of what should be attended to, and against a (less privileged, but nevertheless selected) background of what else – and of how it feels to be faced with this question or an answer to it – extends to ongoing debates about what we’re used to calling historical, critical and social ‘backgrounds’, conducted by editors, curators, archivists, and scholars. Which texts, ideas, events and persons have been and continue to be brought forward as the focus of inquiry to be ‘set against’ which others? Which structures should be picked out and brought to the surface of a discourse, and how? How are works to be presented in museums, galleries, collections, editions, catalogues, anthologies, lectures, critical essays, reading lists? These can’t help but concern us as writers of criticism, for every time we begin work we choose our own figures and grounds, or choose to accept others’ conventions for them; by focusing close attention on these texts and also on our own and others’ approaches to them, these classes will therefore invite not only the exploration but also the development of a variety of reading and writing practices.

Indicative reading list

Apollinaire, Guillaume, *Zone*, trans. by Samuel Beckett in *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett: a critical edition*, ed by Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber and Faber, 2012)

Bergvall, Caroline, *Drift* (Brooklyn and Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2014)

Cage, John, ‘Lecture on Nothing’ and ‘Afternote to “Lecture on Nothing”’ in *Silence: lectures and writings* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), pp. 109-127

de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Stephen F. Rendall (Berkeley CA and London: University of California Press, 2011)

Crary, Jonathan, *Techniques of the observer: On vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT, 1991)

——— *Suspensions of Perception: attention, spectacle and modern culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT, 2001)

Degas, Edgar *The Ballet Scene from Meyerbeer's Opera Robert Le Diable*, 1876, oil on canvas, 76.6 x 81.3cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O17815/the-ballet->

- scene-from-meyerbeers-oil-painting-degas-hilaire-germain/>
- Denby, Edwin, 'Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Streets', in *Dance Writings*, ed. by Robert Cornfield and William Mackay (London: Dance Books, 1986), pp. 548-556
- Featherstone, M., 'Postmodernism and the aestheticization of everyday life', in *Modernity and Identity*, eds S. Lash and J. Friedman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 265–290
- Fénéon, Félix, *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, trans. and with an introduction by Luc Sante as *Novels in three lines* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007)
- Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American minimal music as cultural practice* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2005)
- Gamboni, Dario, *Potential Images: ambiguity and indeterminacy in modern art* (London: Reaktion, 2002)
- Giard, Luce, 'Doing-cooking', in Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and P. Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, trans. T. J. Tomasik, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1980) pp. 149–247
- Hauser, Kitty, *Shadow sites: photography, archaeology, and the British landscape, 1927-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Highmore, Ben, ed, *The Everyday Life Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- Howe, Susan, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 2007)
- 'Writing Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', in Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, ed., *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 199-204
- Jennings, Humphrey, Charles Madge *et al*, eds, *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987)
- Krauss, Rosalind E., *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1993)
- Lawler, Louise, *Pollock and Tureen, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Connecticut, 1984*, silver dye bleach print, 28 x 39", the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- <<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2000.434/>>
- Lichtenstein, Claude, and Thomas Schregenerberger, eds., *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary: British Architecture and Art of the 1950s* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2001)
- Margulis, Elizabeth Hellmuth, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
- Meyer, Bernadette, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1994)
- Mirrlees, Hope, *Paris: A Poem* (London: Hogarth Press, 1919)
- Nesbit, Molly, *Their Common Sense* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000)
- Perloff, Marjorie, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010)
- Perloff, Nancy Lynn, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)
- Rainer, Yvonne, *Trio A (The Mind is a Muscle, Part I)*, choreographed 1966, on A woman who – : selected works of Yvonne Rainer (Chicago, IL: Video Data Bank, 2005)
- Robertson, Lisa, 'Atget's Interiors', in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Astoria: Clear Cut Press, 2003), pp. 188-205
- Stein, Gertrude, 'The Good Anna', in *Three Lives*, in Marianne DeKoven, ed, *Three lives; and, Q.E.D.: authoritative texts, contexts, criticism* (New York: Norton, 2006)
- Scott, Clive, 'Writing and overwriting the sound of the city', in *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 167-186
- *Vers Libre: the emergence of free verse in France, 1886-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)
- Varnedoe, Kirk, *A fine disregard: what makes modern art modern* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990)
- Zieger, Brigitte, *Exploding Wallpaper*, 2007, animated film with sound; *Shooting Wallpaper*, 2012, interactive installation, dimensions variable; *Eldorado Wallpaper*, 2013, animated film, all at <<http://brigittezieger.com>>