Maladies of Attention: The Distracted Subject of Cinema
ENGL 355-01, Monday, 3:30-6:00 p.m.
Screenings: Sunday, 4-6:30 Buttrick 102

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Office Hours: W 12:00-1:30 and by appointment
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Course Description:

Jonathan Crary argues that the norms of attention have arisen in relation to the reciprocal and inseparable phenomena of modern distraction. Paradoxically, distraction may be a tool of attention, and thus attention, as a discrete category of perception, poses several challenges to theorization. Moving across the 19th and 20th century and traveling across the Atlantic, this course queries various modes of distraction that are intricated in absorbed perception, specifically cinematic perception. It proposes to re-assess a few of the canonical films and texts of film theory (realist, surrealist, feminist, Marxist…) that are predicated on distinctions between spectacle and narrative, shock and absorption, fragmentation and totality, and masculine and feminine feeling. The course will also engage films and readings that are not typically theorized together. By pairing theory/criticism and primary texts across a range of media, we will probe the thresholds of modern perceptual, affective, and political states of mind.

To give but two examples: We will read Gustav Flaubert’s 1857 Madame Bovary with Chantal Akerman’s 1975 experimental film Jeanne Dielman while reading chapters from Elizabeth S. Goodstein’s Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity (2005) in order to understand the histories and forms of feminine and feminist boredom. Similarly, at the interstices of attention and commitment, we will ponder the emaciated body as a spectacle of suffering, a narrative of virtuosic self-mastery, an index of oppression, as well as a sign of political withdrawal (in both senses of that word). We will pair such texts as Steve McQueen’s Hunger (2008), Franz Kafka’s 1922 “Hunger Artist” and the writings and films of Brazilian Cinema Nova’s most outspoken theorists, Glauber Rocha 1965 manifesto (“An Aesthetic of Hunger”) and Nelson Pereira dos Santos for whom the depleted body finds its revolutionary representation in the “Sad, ugly…screaming, desperate” cinema of the starving man. This class takes seriously such attentive diversions as forgetfulness, indifference, boredom, repetition, disgust, and ecstasy, and it will attempt to connect them to a range of modern political conditions and affectations.

Required books:
All books are available at the Vanderbilt Bookstore and are on reserve at the Main Library.


Recommended:

Assignments:
Weekly Questions: For each of our Monday meetings please prepare a 150-300-word (typed) reflection on the films and readings for the week. As these texts are, in some weeks, rather disparate, you may focus on one particular detail, or work out some of the ways these text may be connected, or query a problem or underlining assumption in a text. Ideally, this reflection will be formulated as a substantial question or set of questions followed by your own tentative answer. You might also briefly explain how you arrived at this question. These short weekly writings will be the prompts for our in-class discussions and may inspire conference paper proposals and your seminar paper. It will give me an opportunity to respond to your ideas and writing. And, as the semester unfolds, these writings will help you track your own set of critical investments.

Seminar Paper: You have three options. All seminar papers should engage texts from this class. You are welcome, indeed encouraged, to introduce other materials and to read the seminar materials within the context of your interests and areas of specialization.

2. Option two: Two 10-15 page papers. The first due Friday, Oct. 28th by 5:00 p.m., the second due Tues., December 13th by 5:00 p.m.
3. Option Three: One 10-15 page paper due October 28th by 5:00 p.m., which you then expand into a longer seminar paper due on Tues., December 13th by 5:00 p.m.

Robust class participation: I take class participation seriously as measure of your engagement with the material. Come to every class prepared to ask questions, make claims and connections.

Screenings: There are weekly screenings for assigned films. You are encouraged to watch the film on a large screen, but they are also on reserve at the Main Library.

Reading Schedule:

Week 1 (Aug. 29): Modern Distraction

Crary, Suspensions of Perception Ch. 1 and 4.
Screening: Early Cinema in class.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659353

Week 2 (Sept. 5): World-Shaping and Attention

Münsterberg, The Photoplay: A Psychological Study
James, What is an Emotion?
Week 3 (Sept. 12): Political Conditioning and the Affective Revolution

Eisenstein, “Expressive Movement” (OAK)
From *The Eisenstein Reader*:
Taylor, “Introduction”
The Montage of Attractions
The Montage of Film Attractions
The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form
Eisenstein on Eisenstein, the Director of Potemkin
The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)
Nieland, “Eccentric Types” (OAK)
Screening: *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925, 75 min).

Week 4 (Sept. 19): The Cult of Distraction

Kracauer, from *The Mass Ornament*:
Levin, Introduction (recommended)
The Mass Ornament
Calico-World
The Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies
Film 1928
The Cult of Distraction
Hansen, “Ambivalence of the ‘Mass Ornament’: King Vidor’s *The Crowd*” OAK
Screening: *The Crowd* (Vidor, 1928, 98 min).

Week 5 (Sept. 26): Immersion/ Distraction

[http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm)
Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork
Screening: *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl, 1935, 110 min.)

Week 6 (Oct. 3): Surrealist Shock Doctrine, or “the gift of violence.”

Hammond, *L’Âge d’Or* (OAK)
Essays from *The Shadow & Its Shadow*
Hammond, “Available Light”
Aragon / On décor
Kyrou / The Marvelous is Popular
Breton / As in a Wood
Desnos / Picture Palaces
The Surrealist Group? Data Toward the Irrational Enlargement of a Film:
*The Shanghai Gesture*
Kyrou / The Film and I
Legrand / Female X Film = Fetish
Screening: Or: L’Âge d’Or (Buñuel, 1930, 60 min). Highly recommended: The Shanghai Gesture (Sternberg, 1941, 99 min.)

**Week 7 (Oct. 10): Interlude: Distribution of the Sensible**

Rancière, *Aesthetics and Politics*
Rancière, “The Art of the Possible.” (OAK)

**Week 8 (Oct. 17): Feminine Boredom**

Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*
Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, Introduction, Ch. 3
Screening: The Cook the Thief his Wife & Her Lover (Greenaway, 1989, 124 min.)
For our discussion of disgust

Recommended Reading:
Goodstein, Ch. 1 & 2.
Rancière, “Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), (OAK)

**Week 9 (Oct. 24): Feminist Boredom and the Hyper-real**

Mulvey, Laura. “Narrative Cinema and Visual Pleasure”
https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/MarkTribe/Visual+Pleasure+and+Narrative+Cinema
Margulies, Ivone. two chapters from Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday OAK

Screening: Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Ackerman, 1976, 201 min.)
Recommended Reading:
http://www.womynkind.org/scum.htm

**Week 10 (Oct. 31): Disgust and Rotten Politics**

Kolnai, *On Disgust*
Screening: *Sweet Movie* (Makavejev, 1974, 95 min.)

Recommended Reading:

**Week 11 (Nov. 7): Colonial Taste**

Selections from Chanan ed. *Twenty-Five Years of Latin American Cinema* and Johnson, Stam, eds. *Brazilian Cinema* (OAK)
Rocha/ An Aesthetic of Hunger
Birri/ Cinema and Underdevelopment
Week 12 (Nov. 14): The Aesthetics of Hunger

Kafka, “Hunger Artist”
   Full text available: http://www.lundwood.u-net.com/ahunga.htm
   Chapters from Maud Ellman, Hunger Artists (OAK)
   Screening: Hunger (McQueen, 2008, 96 min.)

Week 13: Thanksgiving Break!

Week 14 (Nov. 28): Ecstasy

Bataille, Inner Experience
   Hollywood, Sensible Ecstasy, 1-110.
   Screening: La passion de Jeanne d’Arc (Dreyer, 1928, 110 min.)

Week 15 (Dec. 5): Postscript: Playful Distraction/ Alienation

Debord, Guy. Society of the Spectacle
   Full text available: http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/16
   Screening: Playtime (Tati, 1967, 155 min)

December 8, Eugiene Brinkema at the Penn Warren Center 12- 2 p.m. title, TBA.

Final papers due Tuesday, Dec. 13, 5:00 p.m.