

Representations of Human Nature: A Cultural Historical Approach

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This course has a twofold aim. On the one hand, it offers an introduction to the field of cultural history and its relations to fields such as intellectual history, social history, material history, as well as the field of cultural studies. As such, the course introduces students to methodologies pertinent to the MA Programmes in Cultural Studies offered by our Faculty. Some of the highlights of cultural history include:

- the interest in historical conversations among the fields of literature, philosophy, theology, science, technology, art and popular cultural productions
- the wide array of possible objects of cultural historical investigation: there are cultural histories of gesture and smell, of alcohol, boxing and insomnia, of infinity, inspiration and original sin
- the interest in historical specificity, with questions about how to establish the relevant context, about how to understand the work of cultural representation, and about how old ideas resonate again in new cultural contexts
- the concern with the historians' self-reflexivity, or awareness of their specific positions regarding the way they choose to reconstruct the past, in view of the cultural identity they assume in their own context

On the other hand, this year's course takes 'human nature' as its object of investigation. It seeks to unravel specific historical approaches to human nature in works of literature, philosophy, art and popular culture and invites reflection and discussions on issues such as:

- if 'anthropology' is, broadly speaking, the science of human nature, what are the differences between philosophical, theological and cultural anthropology? how is Aristotle different from Calvin and both from the ethnographic study of cultural identity?
- what to make of the current coexistence of radical relativism about human cultural identities (cultural studies) and universalist views of human nature (cognitive science)?
- how do cultural discourses explore the boundaries of human nature with reference to the fine line separating the human, the animal and the monstrous? what do bees tell us about us? what does Frankenstein?
- how are we to explain the polarity of discourses about human nature from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and the Romantic period? what does it mean to say, with Rousseau, that human nature is fundamentally benevolent, or, with Hobbes, that it is fundamentally aggressive? how are such ideas expressed in the literary works of the time (in Swift or Defoe, for example), and how does our contemporary literature or cinematography revisit those works?
- how are all these perspectives represented in today's popular culture, which has a place for everyone in its own scheme of things – for universalists and culturalists, for radical pessimists and optimists, as well as for middle ground positions, whether in the form of vigorous paradox or diluted confusion?

Technical details: 50% mandatory attendance; debate-focused classes; end-of-term exam/academic essay.