A Word from the Director

Hent de Vries  
Russ Family Professor in the Humanities and Philosophy, Director of The Humanities Center, Johns Hopkins University

Absent any overarching themes, common methods, or overall aims, the current practice of criticism and theory thrives on deeply personal, if often shared, intellectual styles. Yet it testifies also to unplanned resonances of decisive global concerns, the apparent universalizing force of singular idioms and the translation of field-specific concepts into wider contexts that end up by relating to unexpected others without any rule-governed guidance as to how this projection succeeds—as clearly, one is tempted to say, demonstrably—if so often does: creating effects without determining causes and signs without self-evident meaning. Theory travels without given roadmaps in hand, forging new paths each step of the way; and, for its part, criticism operates just as well—indeed, more and more evidently and refreshingly—without established criteria that prejudge its outcomes. The mind and heart learn to wander, the body follows, and—professionally and politically, some would say, spiritually—in the very exercise of this freedom, we all the more grow. Not that anything goes, but much does.

In summer 2015, the thirty-ninth session of the School of Criticism and Theory assembled four six- and four one-week faculty and three guest lecturers, seventy-one participants from North America, Asia, Europe, and Australia as well as numerous occasional visitors from within the larger Cornell community, all of whom over the course of long and intensive weeks explored a new vocabulary and novel forms of understanding across disciplines and boundaries, languages and competences. The beautiful location of Cornell University’s campus resonated with the contemplative mood and energetic flows for which SCT’s summer sessions have come to be known.

Opening this year’s In Theory newsletter I would like to express a special word of gratitude to the six-week seminar leaders, who respectively brought the concept and practice or “scene” of translation from W.V.O. Quine through West African authors like Amadou Hampate Ba, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, and Kwasi Wiredu (Souleymane Bachir Diagne), the idea of affinity from Goethe and Kant, via Kierkegaard, up to Benjamin (Eli Friedlander), the political import of images from Plato’s Timaeus and the Church fathers up to modern cinema (Marie-José Mondzain), and the story of reason in Islam, from the text of the Qur’an and the writings of Avicenna up to Suhrawardi and the present day (Sari Nusseibeh) alive in the most rigorous and suggestive of ways. As seminar leaders they formed not only a congenial dream-team, they were also very gracious with their time as they shared their latest thoughts with all present. Rare are the occasions where we get to see eminent scholars think on their feet and, hence, to witness their thought in action, with all the passion and wider engagement this, especially in the case of these remarkable intellectuals and teachers, so clearly implies.

Many thanks go also to the mini-seminar faculty, who allowed us to let our minds wander into alternative, if often parallel, universes of thought and of practice, broadening the institutional, worldly, indeed, global dimensions in view of which we need to reconceive theory and criticism—and its, perhaps, all too theoretical premises or all too formal criteria—again today. From the fate of metaphysics in the very moment of its downfall and its resurrection in Critical Theory (Peter Gordon), through the restorative moments in which opera in its most advanced expressions allows us to perceive “impossible voices” (Michal Grover-Friedlander), and, onwards, to the disassembly of ontological premises that underlie the Western concept of power and the genesis of the violent God (Gwenaëlle Aubry), to the predicaments, finally, of privacy in a world where Google rules the waves and where, at home, one can be photographed in one’s private surroundings without much legal recourse (Anita Allen)—the topics addressed were broad and complementary to the probings that animated the longer seminars. We also spent a lovely afternoon, led by Neil Hertz, discussing two of Gwenaëlle Aubry’s most recent prize-winning novels.

Finally, this year’s visiting public lecturers opened our eyes to motifs and motivations that were altogether different still. Stanley Fish’s spectacular opening salvo regarding the rise of digital humanities and its conceptual limitations, Bonnie Honig’s at once subtle and daring reflection on the nature and place of “land” and the political use of Biblical concepts (invoking the “power sabbat,” in addition to the jubilee year), and Susan Buck-Morss’s grand finale which urged the audience to take an intellectual historical step back to “Year 1” and to let common theoretical presuppositions stand corrected in light of stubborn historical facts, giving objects their due and primacy, as this alone would help dissipate ingrained conceptions and practices—each single one of these brilliantly delivered provocative claims and arguments added something essential to the table.

From all these different angles there developed a conversation that was as unregulated as it was rewarding, the very gift of thinking.

Yet most of all a word of appreciation should be addressed to the larger group of participants, not only for joining SCT this last summer, showing up each day, doing the many readings, and engaging in all the activities, but also for the wealth of ideas, the penetrating questions, and the sheer promise of reflection and critical practice by which they reminded all present why it is again that those who join SCT love and are deeply committed to the profession. (continued on page 2)
2016 Summer Session: June 19 - July 29

Six-Week Seminars

Branka Arsić
Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and Faculty Affiliate, Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, Columbia University
“Material Life: Vitalism From Spinoza to Deleuze”

Warren Breckman
Rose Family Endowed Term Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania
“The Machiavellian Moment of Radical Democracy”

W. J. T. Mitchell
Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor, English and Art History, University of Chicago; Editor, Critical Inquiry
“Seeing Madness: Insanity, Media, and Visual Culture”

Renata Salecl
Senior Researcher, Institute of Criminology at the University of London
“The Right to Ignorance: Psychoanalysis and Secrets in Times of Surveillance”

Mini-Seminars

Sandra L. Bernmann
Cotsen Professor of the Humanities and Professor of Comparative Literature, Princeton University
“Comparative Literature Meets Translation Theory”

Sharon Cameron
William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English, Emerita, Johns Hopkins University
“Tolstoy, Bresson, and the Ground of the Ethical”

Matthew Engelke
Professor of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science
“Africa and the Secular”

Diana Sorensen
Dean of Arts and Humanities and James F. Rothenberg Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature, Harvard University
“Geographic Imaginaries for the 21st Century: Mobility, Materiality, and the Production of Knowledge”

Visiting Guest Lecturers

Homi Bhabha
Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities, Department of English; Director, Mahindra Humanities Center; Senior Advisor on the Humanities to the President and Provost, Harvard University
“The Quest for Security and Questions of Cultural Form”

Marjorie Levinson
F.L. Huetwell Professor, Department of English, University of Michigan
“Parsing the Frost: Growth of a Poet’s Sentence in ‘Frost at Midnight’”

Timothy Murray
Professor of Comparative Literature and English; Director, Society for the Humanities; Curator, Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media, Cornell University
“Aesthetic Remix: Medial Architectonics, East and West”

(continued from page 1)

a profession, lest one forgets, whose very future they, as participants, are.

Last but not least, I want to thank our superbly efficient, kind and self-effacing staff, without whom nothing we do and enjoy would be possible: Alice Cho, our Program Administrator, Mary Ahl, Administrative Manager for SCT and for the Society for the Humanities, Emily Parsons, our Events Coordinator, as well as our student assistants of the year, Courtney Beauvais, David Frank, and Felix Fernandez-Penny.

In this newsletter, we invite you to read the participant essays to follow, which individually and collectively provide a vivid sense of last summer’s experience. They capture the range and intensity of the intellectual life at SCT and convey the distinct characters of individual seminars as well as the spontaneous relationships and dialogues that developed outside of formal settings.

New intellectual friendships and projects were forged during the course of these weeks, old and all too worn-out alliances and positions were happily dropped. And none of this would have been happening were it not for the happy constellation of minds and bodies, souls and hearts, interests and passions that revealed itself there, as those present immersed themselves in seminars and public lectures, in workshops and merriment.

To continue this tradition, whose fortieth anniversary we will mark in 2016, during a conference with Senior and Honorary Fellows that will take place at Harvard University, we publicize a yearly prospectus, flyer and poster through a large number of channels. But more than anything else, we rely on word of mouth and hope that especially alumni, former faculty, and lecturers will recommend SCT’s summer session to potentially interested peers and colleagues. We draw participants from an increasingly diverse range of disciplines. For while SCT has historically had a strong number of participants in literary studies, we now also attract participants from other humanities, from law schools, and from the social sciences. And, as in the past, we benefit from longstanding relationships with many American and international institutions that sponsor participants annually.

Finally, please take note of the promising line-up of faculty and guest lecturers for 2016, listed at the top of this page. Full information about the upcoming session and the SCT can be found on our website: http://sct.arts.cornell.edu.

Annual SCT Reception at MLA

The annual SCT reception at the MLA will be held on Saturday, January 9th, 2016 from 7:00-8:15pm in Room JW Grand 7, JW Marriott Austin. Past or potential SCT participants have the chance to meet and mingle at this well-attended event. In addition, former and future SCT faculty tend to stop by and the food and conversation make the event something to which former attendees look forward. We hope to see you!

SCT Alumni Network

Please help us keep in touch with SCT alumni. If you did not receive the annual SCT brochure at your current mailing address or if you would like to receive future mailings electronically, please send your updated contact information to Alice Cho, Program Administrator, sctcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu.
Reflections on SCT 2015

In a review for *Boundary 2* of Walter Benjamin’s *Selected Writings*, Professor Eli Friedlander writes that from the texts there emanates a demand “to enter the work rather than absorb its aura, en passant, in the idle spirit of the holiday.” This summer at the School of Criticism and Theory, Friedlander’s students got to do both. Together we entered Benjamin’s writings with an earnest curiosity and a wish to finally make sense of this author whom we had attempted to understand before, with varying degrees of success. Everyone seemed to have brought their own Benjamin with them to Ithaca: I had my “Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” Benjamin, some came with their Benjamin of the *Trauerspiel*, others still brought with them “Marxist Benjamin,” and finally there was Benjamin’s figure of the Angel of History, wings heavy from over-citation. Over the course of six weeks, Eli challenged us to not think quite so dialectically, but rather to understand that the determinateness of knowledge is not the purview of the beautiful—and that’s what we were looking for, after all.

First we read Goethe’s novel of marital discontent *Elective Affinities*, then Benjamin’s essay on the fateful lives of Charlotte, Edward, and Ottile. Reading the two works in tandem allowed us to think anew about the role of the critic in relation to the work of art. What is the relationship between truth and beauty? And better, more challenging, still: Can truth do justice to beauty? I learned that criticism requires inspiration in nearly equal measure to the creation of art itself. This imbues our work as critics with a heft, a responsibility, that should invigorate and terrify us, perhaps also in equal measure. I cannot recall how many times I have been told over the course of my graduate experience that my doctoral degree will soon be obsolete. Tenure is dead! Publish or perish! The death knell of the Humanities has been ringing in my ears since day one of the PhD. What a thought then, to consider that the work of criticism is the pursuit of both truth and beauty, that critique may even be a way of doing justice to the expression of the beautiful. A rare and necessary optimism emerged in our seminar that I will cling to.

Of course, there was the temptation to want to merely absorb the aura of Benjamin’s words without fully entering the work—it was July. Yet, what Eli painstakingly laid bare for us was that the expression of beauty is not something entirely serious, there is an element of play to it. And so, while idleness was not our method, a playfulness slowly but surely came to be a part of our collective thinking. The enigmatic metaphors that Benjamin is known for—his striking but ultimately confounding images—compelled me to actually think differently. The idea of mastering the text went out the window, and was replaced with the aim of understanding. There is no pinning down a thinker like Benjamin, but with patience and a little hope, a more imaginative approach to critical thought can come to light.

Eli reminded us of a phrase that Benjamin wrote to his friend Gershom Scholem that resonates with my more capacious understanding of reason born out of SCT. Benjamin said that “a philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee grounds and cannot explicate it cannot be a true philosophy.” It strikes me that the irrational, the playful, the hopeful, is the very condition of possibility for the rational and critical. What is more, I think, I hope, that we came out the other side of our shared six weeks at Cornell with the coffee grounds under the bed of our nails, with something of the soothsayer about us.

Julia Cooper
University of Toronto
“Invention begins in the joyful free association of the mind,” writes Arthur Molella, a leading scholar in the study of invention and innovation. The spirit of play allows a thinker to form loose associations between our ideas. These associations give rise to invention and creativity. I have resorted to these words of Molella to explain to myself the sense of creativity and innovation I experienced during my time at the School of Criticism and Theory (SCT). As a graduate student struggling to develop new ideas for my dissertation, SCT has proven to be most helpful. I have brought together or “played with” so many different ideas at SCT. I am a better student, thinker and future scholar for it.

My seminar was called “The Story of Reason In Islam.” It was taught by Sari Nusseibeh. Professor Nusseibeh is a creative and public-spirited thinker. He has put so much effort into building peace and understanding between Palestine and Israel. He is a problem-solving philosopher; he “scratches where it itches,” to use a slightly modified version of a statement by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Professor Nusseibeh’s approach to learning and life indeed made our seminar special.

We approached “reason” as a faculty for understanding other minds and resolving conflicts. We studied the Quran and the debates it provoked. We have tried to understand and reconcile the rifts between jurists and philosophers in medieval Islam. We considered the “reason” and reasoning of grammarians who participated in philosophical discussion. Though I was born and raised in a Muslim country and took so many classes in humanities and social sciences, I had never engaged this material in such depth. I am grateful to Professor Nusseibeh and all participants in the seminar.

Let me mention a few “loose associations” that I made in the course of mini-seminars, colloquia, social events, and more casual conversations at different locations in the beautiful Cornell campus and “gorgeous” Ithaca, mostly over coffee and bagels. Peter Gordon, the leader of one of the mini-seminars, encouraged me to think deeper on issues of faith and reason, two categories that were also fundamental to my seminar. I have consequently given much thought to ways of drawing ethical inspirations from religion without succumbing to irrationality and fanaticism. Perhaps, I supposed, Abu Nasr al-Farabi, a thinker we studied in my seminar, can be a reliable guide for such a project. I have decided to devote a chapter to al-Farabi in my dissertation. Let me note another “association.” In her public lecture, political theorist Susan Buck-Morss constructed a beautiful history documented in texts and objects, a history in which the categories of “Muslim,” “Christian,” and “Jew” dissolve into each other. That reminded me that the “story of reason” in Islam does not belong to Muslims alone; it is a shared story among faiths. All these were my personal “Eureka” moments. There were many others. While personal, these moments emerged in and through joyful conversation. That was made possible by the spirit of the SCT. I am glad for breathing that spirit in and out.

In conclusion, SCT enhanced my studies, exposed me to new ideas and kept me connected to real-world problems. It has made me relate to part of my own intellectual heritage in a more informed way.

Let me note another “association.” In her public lecture, political theorist Susan Buck-Morss constructed a beautiful history documented in texts and objects, a history in which the categories of “Muslim,” “Christian,” and “Jew” dissolve into each other. That reminded me that the “story of reason” in Islam does not belong to Muslims alone; it is a shared story among faiths. All these were my personal “Eureka” moments. There were many others. While personal, these moments emerged in and through joyful conversation. That was made possible by the spirit of the SCT. I am glad for breathing that spirit in and out.

In conclusion, SCT enhanced my studies, exposed me to new ideas and kept me connected to real-world problems. It has made me relate to part of my own intellectual heritage in a more informed way. It has allowed me to experience joy in turning myself into a better student and future scholar. I will keep SCT in my mind and heart.

Onur Muftugil
University of Florida
am glad that our first encounter with Marie-José Mondzain started with a memorable image. In mid-June, because a software glitch hit the American visa system worldwide, she could not fly across the Atlantic Ocean until the second week of SCT. Thanks to Skype, though, we were able to open the seminar on “imaging operation” by means of a digital image. We saw Mondzain’s face speaking to us via the webcam in her study, tall wooden bookshelves standing in the backdrop, painted in ocean blue. At some point, in response to our question about the psychological genesis of image perception, Mondzain got up to look for a book on autism by the French thinker Fernard Dilegny in her room: she searched her bookshelves, grabbed several books, flipped through them, picked up the right one, turned to the page of Dilegny’s cartographic “wander lines” and exhibited the graphic to us via the camera. Her movements behind the camera turned the Skype image to via the camera. Her movements behind the camera turned the Skype image to an animated narrative. Her sharing of Dilegny’s wander-line image was not merely a pedagogical gesture, but also an animated narrative. Her sharing of Dilegny’s wander-line image was not merely a pedagogical gesture, but also a hospitable invitation to mere methodology of interpretation. In addition to grappling with these critical issues, participants in our seminar also bring in voices from Marxist critique of capitalism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, racial and gender politics in reading specific images, narratives, and cinemas. Not all the perspectives are always compatible, but that is the way to make any meaningful conversation happen. Such productive collision also occurs among professors: Peter Gorton explicates Habermas’ belief in “the mode of nondestructive secularization as translation,” a process ethically guided by religion, and likewise, Souleymane Bachir Diagne advocates translation as a universal language of all languages, whereas Mondzain challenges with rejection to stay in the camp of criminals. Is SCT a “pure event” in my life, like the one that happens to the bourgeois family in Teorema? That remains to be seen. But SCT is more than professional development. It is a visceral event of self-fashioning. It tears up any rigid disciplinary boundary and encourages us to cross over. It compels us to read so fast that we only have time to gulp down a large corpus of data on a daily basis. But as Eli Friedlander reminds us in the seminar panel, going too fast could be a virtue. In Walter Benjamin’s story “In the Sun,” the protagonist was walking down the hill to chase the sinking sun when he found he was losing control of his fast-moving feet. He then became aware that “his imagination had made itself independent of him” and “begun to operate on him of its own accord.” High speed spurs and intensifies one’s imagination. Everything remains just as it is after SCT—“only a little bit different,” as imagination draws a fluttering veil beneath which everything changes imperceptibly. I will remember the magnificent vistas of gorges in Ithaca, performances of Henry IV and Midsummer Night’s Dream by the Ithaca Shakespeare Company, the outdoor terrace screening of Caddyshack at Willard Straight Hall, the “Harry Potter” library, the comfort of a zero gravity bench in the museum of art, the alluring taste of Cornelia’s Dark Secret at Cornell Diary Bar, the echoes of Carl Schmitt’s reading group, and my first “roast.” Such incidents are memorable, and now it is time to march on.

Renren Yang
Stanford University
Sitting patiently on my 18hr flight from Brisbane to L.A. I had to admit to myself that I wasn’t sure what awaited me on the other side of the seemingly endless stream of in-flight movies. I had never been to the U.S. and I had certainly never been to an internationally renowned school of criticism and theory. Of the former I had a solid—if all too glittering, shallow and most likely false—mental image; built, layer by layer, by constant access to the America of screens and pages. Of the latter, I had only a sense of nervous excitement and an expectation of my own inadequacies.

On arrival, I was immediately conscious of the idyllic peace of my surroundings (I suppose the fact that I was quite literally lulled to sleep each night by the sound of water cascading down Cascadilla Falls certainly helped that impression). But the beautiful environment did little to silence the persistent question that had occupied my thoughts during my long transit: why on earth hadn’t I read more? Why didn’t I know more? It was not until meeting my fellow participants that the answers to these questions appeared. Of course I didn’t know enough. Can you ever? What was important about the intellectual life of the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell is that the astounding amounts of knowledge housed in the books of other libraries and the minds of other people is not a source of intimidation, but an unfailingly generous challenge.

Against the level plane of pleasant memories of my time at the School of Criticism and Theory, there are moments and experiences that stand in vivid relief: long treks up excruciating hills, the irresistible American phenomenon that is deep-dish pizza, consistently coming in second at Rulloff’s weekly trivia and most of all the impressive, generous and inspiring mind of Professor Souleymane Bachir Diagne. Under the heading “Scenes of Translation” Professor Diagne assembled a challenging reading list that stretched from Boolean mathematics to The African Charter of People’s and Human Rights. With a group of fellow participants that included a nurse, historians, literary scholars, and philosophers I spent easily the best six hours of every week in White Hall debating the existence of pure language and expounding the positive potential of horizontal translation.

It was not only Professor Diagne’s seemingly endless knowledge and insatiable curiosity that drove these sessions, but also his teaching style which allowed those of us in the cheap seats an intellectual agency and freedom seldom found in more strictly functional courses. Our minds were permitted to wander and breathe. Though we were seldom allowed to reach the more absurd limits of our arguments, segues into personal experience and expertise were encouraged, leading to discussions that were spontaneous and invigorating. The Australian post-graduate system does not contain an element of course work, and as the weeks passed, I began to realize how much I thirsted for and consequently relished these six uninterrupted weeks of learning for its own sake alone.

Since returning to Australia I have found that many of the texts introduced to me by Professor Diagne and other faculty and participants of SCT contribute directly to my current work. However, the lasting effect of SCT that I rate higher than any boost to my bibliography is the re-invigoration of my scholarship sparked by connections made with like-minded scholars and continually fed by their passion for thought and language. Importantly, this passion was as often expressed through conflict as agreement. The fervent debates that took place in and outside the classroom and the many points raised in our final colloquium reminded me that it is passionate conflict that will drive our work forward and open our thinking to new and important possibilities.

In his opening address to participants, SCT Director Hent de Vries stressed the liberating freedom from themes we would encounter during our next six weeks. However, looking back on my time I am struck by one cohesive and persistent intellectual challenge: the task of translation, and more broadly, communication. Whether it was attempting to explain my work to others, contemplating how theory might translate into praxis, or simply deciphering the language of the American legal system, my time at SCT forced me to examine the intellectual world in which I live and not just broaden, but permanently perforate its horizons.

Jean Skeat
University of Queensland
I spent the 2014-15 school year on fellowship—out of the classroom, mixing only with the odd librarian—so my resurfacing at SCT’s opening reception in June entailed a sharp re-entry shock. Making introductions was like arriving at graduate school for the first time, but for a second time. “Where are you from?” “What do you ‘do’?” I had forgotten how people in this business can talk—do talk—given an opening. Theorists, it quickly came back to me, do not possess a bottomless sense of the ridiculous. Stanley Fish greeted us first week with the promise—nay, the challenge—that our summer would transform our lives. My summer in Ithaca, however, proved less transformative than restorative, a period in which the burden of the mystery, as Wordsworth puts it, of all the sometimes unintelligible world of Theory was, at least for a moment, lighten’d.

Goethe, we learned, considered “the highest” to be understanding that all fact is really theory. I had heard this before, pondered it awhile, then let it slip away. SCT thrust it back into the center of my field of vision with the force of the blue of the sky. To borrow John Henry Newman’s term of art, I had never quite ‘realized’ before the corporeal frame of Theory, felt it in the blood or along the heart. Most of the pleasures of my summer interlude in Ithaca must, alas, now go unnamed, and will, no doubt, go unremembered hence, but the blessed mood the months afforded will, I’m sure, have no trivial influence on future portions of my theoretical life.

“I’m sitting over here not because I can’t stand you all,” one of the members of Eli Friedlander’s seminar “On Affinity” announced from a desk in a corner of the classroom. (The rest of us were settling down to the seminar table for another antijunctacular session of Benjamin on Goethe.) “I’m just allergic to the scents you use.” This was only the first of several impossible things I heard before breakfast that morning. Early abstraction on an empty stomach, I came to understand, is the essence of theory. Theory is an affair of the gut and the heart as well as the head. Also of the nose. And the ears and the eyes and the mouth. To adapt a line of William Blake’s: Theory has a human face.

A budding Benjaminian, I should have realized this already. “No one who has never eaten a food to excess has ever really experienced it, or fully exposed himself to it.” Benjamin was speaking of fresh figs in that essay, but had he been in Eli Friedlander’s seminar this summer he might well have applied it to his own nutritious images. All of us read a lot of Benjamin. I gorged on him. “Perhaps it really is possible to compare reading and consuming.” Benjamin is onto something there. “We do not read to increase our experiences; we read to increase ourselves.”

I read a lot—never enough. Talked a lot—always too much. I showed up for Eli’s every office hour. The first week he let me stay the entire hour. Wholly supererogatory, the extracurricular reading group that I joined—the one its organizer convened under the irresistible title “Aesthetics, Booze, Nihilism”—turned out to be the central experience of my summer. We five were all about the Benjamin—Fridays and weekends no exception. What hath the Sabbath to do with sleep? Sit me on a sofa on a Sunday afternoon with a handful of Destructive Characters, crack open the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” pass around the figs...can I come back to theory camp as a counselor next year? Forget about “experience”—I’m out to increase myself.

Thomas Berenato
University of Virginia
A
fter a long spell of teaching, with no room for research, my stay at the School of Criticism and Theory was accompanied by a sense of exuberant relief. Undeniably, it might have something to do with the exotic sensation of a high summer and the exciting topography of Cornell’s campus furrowed with ravines and smelling of pine trees. True, this was an enhancement (and not merely an added unexpected bonus), but the sense of relief was mainly due to the pleasure of encountering smart, inquisitive, and imaginative people coming from the same or adjacent intellectual territories—philosophy, art, anthropology, cinema, music, literature—in a context of lectures and seminars but also of informal discussions.

I participated in Marie-José Mondzain’s seminar, devoted to the theory of the image. The seminar focused on the philosophical reading of the relation between images and that which they symbolically mediate and distribute, i.e., authority and power. The seminar emphasized the inseparability of pleasure of encountering smart, inquisitive, and imaginative people coming from the same or adjacent intellectual territories—philosophy, art, anthropology, cinema, music, literature—in a context of lectures and seminars but also of informal discussions.

We started with debates accompanying the Byzantine crisis of iconicity of the 8th century CE that not only absorbed but also critically reformulated both the Greek ontological speculation on mimesis and the monotheist prohibition of images through the “dispositif” of “economy.” The latter was defined as “the law of the image,” the doctrine of the image describing the relation of the imaginary to life or of the invisible to visibilities. The discussions revealed the intrinsically contradictory and political nature of all images as mediators of authority and freedom. From there we moved on to the modern invisibilities, to how they are produced and controlled by the visual industries and techniques and to their consequences in terms of power and authority.

The discussion material ranged from philosophical readings such as Derrida’s “Khora”, Plato’s Timaeus or Benjamin’s “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin”, through literary works (Kafka’s “The Silence of the Sirens”), to film (Tarkovsky’s Stalker, Pasolini’s Teorema, Resnais’ Le Chant du Styrene).

The topics of other seminars and lectures were diverse and yet they communicated with one another in a fruitful way. Hent de Vries’s idea of drawing on similarities in intellectual styles rather than on a method or a school of thought permitted us to avoid sterile, monothematic discussions without affecting the stringency of argumentation.

A number of lectures shared a common thread. It was for me the idea of conveying the incommunicable or of conveying something beyond the agreed upon channels of communicability (such as concepts or signs), variously addressed by respective speakers when they were drawing in their discussions on the debates about representation, mimesis, reception, skepticism, translatability and receptivity in philosophical, aesthetic, theological, and political terms. Mondzain’s seminar contributed to it by addressing the relation of the invisible to visibilities both in the early Christian thought and in the contemporary art. But Peter Gordon’s discussion of the aesthetic reception of Mosaic prohibition (in the lecture on religion and other sources of normative experience in Adorno and Habermas) also contributed to this question. Eli Friedlander, in focusing on pure receptivity in Benjamin, addressed a problematic case of “transmission”: a spiritual absorption of color, neither mediated by concepts nor given to us as mere sensory impressions but rather permeating us like space. When discussing opera, Michal Grover-Friedlander’s lecture on opera gave rise to a discussion of a similar possibility of “inhaling” music—and of how to account for it in our critical accounts of music. Conveying the unconveyable—this time in the guise of what is lost in translation from one language to another, and in the guise of a test (of universality)—appeared also in Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s lecture, where translation was interpreted as the locus of the operations leading to a working out of what Merleau-Ponty called “lateral universality” (universality dependent not on concepts assumed to be shared but on the incessant testing of their translatability from one language to another).

I have to confess some post-Ithaca spleen, the withdrawal symptoms when it was over: the spontaneously bourgeoning reading groups, the exchanges after film-and opera-viewings (“Empress’s Feet”!), an occasional cinema visit and on-campus Shakespeare, the intense discussions with fellow participants and faculty, and so much more.

Asja Szafraniec
Amsterdam University College
s an epigraph an epigraph because it explains the work or because it comes at the beginning? I think you have to put an epigraph at the beginning of a work because otherwise the first thought or impression that climbs unbidden into the reader’s consciousness will stick with him or her through the duration of the work. Appearances and other sensations necessarily influence intellectual processes. My own epigraph to Summer 2015 at SCT came on my second night when Emerson Baik asked me what was the progression of ideas between Bacon and Kant. The enormity of the question; a momentary sinking feeling. I quipped that Bacon’s de-emphasis of rhetorical style (itself a rhetorical pose thrown in the teeth of the Renaissance Humanists) allowed bad writers like Kant to be invited to the party come-as-you-are. I would spend the rest of my time in Cornell answering the question more seriously and, as the one Renaissance England scholar in attendance, this frame helped me to transition out of bounded thinking about my time period.

Joking about Kant’s writing from a Renaissance perspective leads to some paradoxical ramifications because, while the former’s faults are universally acknowledged his philosophical power is undeniable, whereas so much Renaissance philosophy is redundant precisely because it sacrifices logic for sonority. Aside from Luther and Calvin, of the major works of philosophy to be produced in the entire 16th century, most are either rehashes of the achievements of previous eras and some happy few are literary achievements that seem merely to raise philosophical questions—Praise of Folly, Utopia, Montaigne’s Essais. Perhaps only Machiavelli’s The Prince, Utopia, and the works of Petrus Ramus are studied as historically significant philosophical inquiry.

And yet if we look at the humanists who begin to transition out of the humanist milieu of the Renaissance—Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke—we see by comparison that the few and slim major works of Renaissance philosophy are more, not less, potent philosophical works for being great works of literature, and, for better or for worse, More’s Utopia and Erasmus’ Praise of Folly would lose their philosophical power if their writers had not been stylists first and foremost.

Philip Sidney explains why in his Apology for Poetry, when he declares that poetry is the art of using the “erected wit” to bolster the virtue of the “infected will.” Philosophy without literature, he explains, is so dry that only one who is already a virtuous and learned philosopher will slog through it.

The point of the connection between beauty and idea, between seeing and doing, was particularly driven home for me by Ithaca’s summertime landscape: of all the universities I have visited or resided in, Cornell is the most beautiful. I believe that much of what I learned, and nearly all of what I retained during this past summer is at least partly a function of the luxury and splendor of its trees and rivers.

I arrived at Ithaca suspecting that Kant represented all that was wrong with philosophy—Kant along with his inscrutable progeny, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Derrida, et al. I liked dense, terse, psychedelic Benjamin for some reason, which, considering this summer’s reading list, turned out to be a good thing. A Renaissance scholar to the core, I asked myself, and, sometimes, others, why could not a great thinker also strive to be a competent writer? I credit my subsequent reconsideration to keeping company with such diversely interested colleagues and the challenge again, of rethinking boundaries among my field and others’.

I have seen other Renaissance scholars having to make similar adjustments: rereading Derrida’s Grammatology this summer, I saw and remembered, for instance, why my dissertation adviser, himself a scholar of Erasmus, voiced a desire to teach a class on the Algerian-born convolute. When we asked him why, he said that Derrida, though as obscure as Kant, had, unlike Kant, and indeed unique among modern philosophers, a literary style illustrative of his reasoning. Benjamin, too, boasts of this property. In other words, they would be among friends in the 16th century for their fusion of form and function. That is, until they were discovered to be Jews; racism is another kind of bounded thinking, which, not incidentally, was one of the themes of the seminar I attended. Professor Diagne’s “Scenes of Translation.” One of the major takeaways of that class is that ethnocentrism is what is wrong with philosophy; not the overlong sentences of Immanuel Kant.

Mill begins an essay On Liberty by specifying which peoples do not deserve liberty. We must be aware that sneering at his prejudice does not absolve us of our respective own prejudices—one of which, among philosophers, is directed against popular forms of entertainment—except More, Shakespeare, Dickens, Charlie Parker… pretty much anyone dead. We must not sneer that most Americans ascribe what tolerant views they have, not to John Rawls, but to The Cosby Show and Modern Family. So we are left with an inescapable tension between philosophical inquiry and aesthetic presentation, a tension which, if we can cope with it, will lend a power to our modes of thought and communication which Erasmus and More, Benjamin and Derrida would have understood quite well.

When I think back to my time in Ithaca not so long ago, my mind does not immediately light upon this or that conversation, lecture, pithy comment, seminar. First my mind retraces the myriad falling droplets of Fall Creek, the spreading boughs of crabapple trees, the view from the carrels of Olin Library. Then to the friends with whom I shared those sights. Then to the insights we shared. Then, renewed, back to the dissertation.

Adam Katz
Stony Brook University

Adam Katz
In one episode from a 2002 Syrian comedy entitled *The Four Seasons*, an amateur and penniless poet called Barhūm falls from the rooftop of his building while he tries to adjust an old satellite dish. Alarmed, Barhūm’s wife, and his well-off in-laws take him to the hospital hoping he would recover from his mini-coma. Barhūm wakes up, but with a partially lost memory. He forgets who he is and begins to sever all the kinship ties with his family members. To the shock of his family, and to the amusement of the spectators, when Barhūm is asked “what is your name?” he answers with only one famous line from an immortal poem by the medieval tenth-century Abbasid poet, Al-Mutanabbi: “I am the one [whose words can be seen (even) by the blind].” The events unfold thereupon with a satirical personality of “the one” levelling his hostile words against his family members, thus revealing Barhūm’s crude, unembellished reading of the class and social disparities he recognized between himself and his wealthy in-laws, and which he was unable to talk about frankly. The episode offers an homage to the underprivileged and unacknowledged men of art and culture in the modern Middle East. Moreover, it makes a statement about the amnesia that a contemporary belletrist has to undergo in order to bypass not only the Arab modern subjectivity with its complexities, but also centuries of Arabic cultural and intellectual stagnation following the Golden Age of the Arabo-Islamic Empire— when belletrists were the select in the society. Rhetorically able to penetrate walls of blindness and deafness, Barhūm does not only cause a revolution within the family, but returns to a version of an older and more rigorous medieval self, which is now subject to trials of modernity.

With a slightly similar anxiety, I see fragments of myself in this Barhūm. Perhaps that was why I decided to pursue my studies on the shores of a town whose name invokes Ulysses and the restoration of the fragmented self he lost at sea. Then came the chance to listen to the narrative which Sari Nusseibeh reconstructed about “The Story of Reason in Islam” in the School of Criticism and Theory session, 2015. A group of scholars came from different walks of academia and met regularly for an average of six hours a week to investigate Islamic philosophy, treating it with high levels of abstraction. Not very different from the ninth-century Majālis of the Abbāsid Yahyā Albarmakī, where philosophers came from different corners of the Islamic Empire to investigate “love” (with Plato’s *Symposium* in the back of their minds), this group also
asked questions. Their approach was elegiac. They reimagined a distant golden age brought to a prolonged intellectual halt when a twelfth-century defender of Aristotelianism, Averroes, died in defense of his conviction that there was no contradiction between Islamic Sharia Law and philosophy. What was really there, he thought, was only an incompatibility of two different modalities of examination in these fields. With a flashback, the group read through primary texts of debates in Islamic theology and Arabic philology. They recognized rigorous moments in Islamic history where the tension between the profane and the sacred was mediated through philosophical debates, sometimes violent and divisive, but oftentimes contagious enough to start intellectual movements that eventually engendered Islamic philosophy.

While the leap into the Islamic past was wide enough to take them all the way to late Antiquity and Medieval periods, it was not meant to place them in a position which severed their connection with the present. On the one hand, one of Nusseibeh’s questions revolved around the absence of any paradigm-shifting ideas in contemporary Islamic thought and whether the absence is connected to the divide between the classical, sacred Arabic, and the spoken, profane one. On the other hand, the public lectures and the mini-seminars which punctuated their history-oriented sensibilities placed the group in the larger context of the SCT philosophical escapade—with topics discussed going as contemporary as the digital humanities and the aural experience of the operatic voice. The feeling of relevance was secured. Therefore, if Barhūm’s time-travel and impersonation of a medieval figure was accomplished at the expense of his connection to the present, I did not have to undergo such a trial, neither in Nusseibeh’s seminar, nor outside it.

It is difficult to ascertain whether Ithaca is a place to recollect fragments of myself because there is something inherently restorative in its name, or whether we, with our desperation for the magical, tend to project our mythic knowledge of the place onto our experiencing of it. In either case and as someone continuing to grapple with modern anxiety and a profound disconnect with a meaningful past, what Ithaca and the SCT offered me was more than a normal time-traveler could dream of.

Rama Alhabian
Cornell University
SCT faculty and participants at Taughannock Falls State Park