

# In Theory



CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
WINTER 2016

## A Word from the Director



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

The School of Criticism and Theory (SCT) is sponsored by Cornell University and by a consortium of some thirty major American and foreign universities. Every summer, it assembles eight distinguished faculty for the duration of four six-week long seminars and four one-week mini-seminars.

We admit between eighty and one hundred participants, who sign up for one of the longer seminars and actively participate in all other events (which include public lectures, film screenings, spontaneous reading groups, and colloquia with faculty around pre-circulated papers). The intensive format of the summer institute enables participants to forge lifelong intellectual friendships as well as strong connections with the group of faculty and other visitors, which often include members of SCT's distinguished group of Senior and Honorary Fellows. In addition to the scholarly working sessions, SCT hosts an impressive amount of receptions, outings, and social events at which participants have the chance to interact more informally with each other and with the faculty, Senior and Honorary Fellows, visitors, and the wider Cornell academic community.

In summer 2016, the fortieth session of the School of Criticism and Theory convened, once again, eight distinguished faculty members and three guest prominent public lecturers, and, this time, ninety-five participants from North and South America, Asia, Europe, and Australia, as well as numerous occasional visitors from within the larger Ithaca community, all of whom over the course of long and intensive weeks explored a new vocabulary and novel forms

of understanding across disciplinary boundaries, languages, and competences. The beautiful location of Cornell University's campus resonated with the singular combination of contemplative moods and energetic flows for which SCT's summer sessions have come to be known.

Opening this yearly Newsletter, I would like to express a special word of gratitude to our eminent seminar leaders Branka Arsić, Warren Breckman, W.J.T. (Tom) Mitchell, and Renata Salecl. During the six long weeks, they formed not only a congenial dream-team, discussing their latest thoughts—on material life and vitalism, the Machiavellian moment of radical democracy, madness and visual culture, psychoanalysis, secrecy, and surveillance technologies—but they were also gracious with their time as they shared their most recent contemplations with all present. Rare are the occasions where we get to see eminent scholars think on their feet, to witness thought in action, with all the passion and wider institutional and political engagement this, especially in the case of these remarkable intellectuals and teachers, so clearly implies. I remember well what it takes to sustain a level of intensity and quality of common readings and discussions over such a long period and in the company of some of the smartest and most highly motivated participants one will ever meet in a seminar. As seminar leaders, these colleagues have shown us a model of what it still and increasingly means to be an academic and intellectual presence in ways that are exemplary and worthy of emulation. This is how we all learn and become better scholars and teachers.

Many thanks go also to the superb mini-seminar faculty, Sandra L. Bermann, Sharon Cameron, Matthew Engelke, and Diana Sorensen, who allowed us to let our minds wander into alternative, if often parallel, universes of thought and of practice, broadening the social and geographic, literary and visual, institutional and global dimensions, in view of which we need to reconceive the idiom and conceptual armature—and,

perhaps, all too theoretical premises or criteria—of theory and criticism again today. The topics they addressed were varied, broad, and complementary to the deep probing that animated the longer seminars. They ranged from the translation theory debates to the new geographic imaginaries construing knowledge, and from the ground of ethics in the Tolstoy and Bresson to reconceiving secularism with Africa as a central reference in mind.

My sincere thanks also go to the visiting public lecturers, Stanley Fish, Marjorie Levinson, and Timothy Murray, who opened our eyes to motifs and motivations that were altogether different still and added something essential as well: free speech and academic freedom, poetry and poetics in Robert Frost, and the remixing of medial technologies in contemporary Asian art. From all these different angles there developed a conversation that was as unregulated as it was rewarding, the very gift of thinking.

From all these different angles, to which separate discussions of Occupy Wall Street and of Spiritual Experience were further added, 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 larger group of participants, not only for joining us at SCT this 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 (during the Q&A session following public lectures, during the colloquia, the office hours, and over drinks) why it is again that those who join SCT love and are deeply committed to the profession, a profession, lest one forgets, which is a genuine calling, as Max Weber taught us, and whose very future and present carriers they, as participants, are.

In this Newsletter, we invite you to read the participant essays to follow, which

## 2017 Summer Session: June 18 - July 27

### Six-Week Seminars

#### Emily Apter

Professor of French and Comparative Literature; Chair, Department of Comparative Literature, New York University  
*"Thinking in Untranslatables: Revisiting the Gender/Genre Problem"*

#### Faisal Devji

Reader in History and Fellow of St. Antony's College, University of Oxford  
*"Humanity"*

#### Michael Puett

Walter C. Klein Professor of Chinese History, Department of Eastern Languages and Civilizations; Chair of the Committee on the Study of Religion, Harvard University  
*"Rethinking Religion: Cosmopolitan and Comparative Perspectives"*

#### Carolyn Rouse

Professor and Chair of Anthropology and Director of the Program in African Studies, Princeton University  
*"The Case Against Reparations: A Radical Rethinking of Social Justice in the 21st Century"*

### Mini-Seminars

#### Philippe Descola

Chair, Anthropology of Nature, Collège de France; Director of Studies, Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales  
*"Ontological Pluralism as Anthropological Critique"*

#### Shoshana Felman

Robert Woodruff Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and French, Emory University; Thomas E. Donnelly Professor Emerita of French and Comparative Literature, Yale University  
*"Literature and Vulnerability"*

#### Avishai Margalit

Schulman Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Hebrew University of Jerusalem; former George F. Kennan Professor, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University  
*"Just and Unjust Wars"*

#### Anthony Vidler

Professor of Architecture, Cooper Union; Vincent Scully Visiting Professor of Architectural History, Yale University  
*"The Smooth and the Rough: Surfaces Psychological and Architectural from Adrian Stokes to Rem Koolhaas"*

### Visiting Guest Lecturers

#### Amanda Anderson

Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities and English; Director, Cogut Center for the Humanities, Brown University; Honorary Senior Fellow, School of Criticism and Theory  
*"Political Psychology: Theory and Doxa"*

#### Jonathan Culler

Class of 1916 Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Cornell University; Honorary Senior Fellow, School of Criticism and Theory  
*"Narratology and the Lyric"*

#### Frances Ferguson

Ann L. and Lawrence B. Buttenweiser Professor and Chair, Department of English, University of Chicago  
*"Molding Populations: Deep Education"*

#### Mariët Westermann

Executive Vice President for Programs and Research, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation  
*"The Humanities in the World"*

[Click here](#)  
for Online Application and  
Program Information

(continued from page 1)

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 these weeks, old and all too worn-out intellectual positions were happily dropped. 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 who were present immersed themselves in interdisciplinary encounters, reading groups, and merriment.

Last Spring, [we celebrated SCT's fortieth anniversary](#) during a conference with Senior and Honorary Fellows, hosted by Harvard's Mahindra Humanities Center. I would like to thank its Director Homi Bhabha, also member of our Board, and his colleagues (Steven Biehl, Executive Director; Sarah Razor, Events Coordinator; and Jane Acheson, facilitating all communication between the Mahindra Humanities Center and our SCT staff at Cornell) for their kind willingness and unique generosity in

welcoming us during the conference and the Meeting of the SCT Board that preceded it. The conference had a timely theme, Theory and Criticism in an Age of Populism, and was well attended. It offered a broad panorama of viewpoints, with excellent lectures by Peter Gordon, John Brenkman, John Hamilton, Amanda Anderson, Stephen G. Nichols, Bonnie Honig, and brilliant summary account by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.

The School of Criticism and Theory began in 1976 as "a forum for the work of leading critical theorists and scholars in a wide variety of humanistic and interpretive social-science disciplines." It was founded at the University of California, at Irvine, and then relocated to Northwestern University, where the summer school session took place from 1981 through 1985, and subsequently moved to Dartmouth College, where it resided from 1986 through 1996. SCT moved to Cornell University, in Ithaca, in 1997, where it has found a secure home in the beautiful A.D. White House, home to Cornell's distinguished Society for the Humanities, ever since. Its former directors include Murray Krieger, Geoffrey Hartman, Michael Riffaterre, Stephen Nichols, Dominick LaCapra, and Amanda Anderson. Yet the school's full history remains to be written, now that "theory at Yale" and the humanities

elsewhere have become topics of wider discussion and, sometimes, concern, and just as a formidable inventory of worldwide Critical Theory programs and centers is currently being undertaken at the initiative of Judith Butler, Senior SCT Board Member, with the help of Penelope Deutscher and a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. It was brought to our attention by Hans Ulrich (Sepp) Gumbrecht, Senior SCT Board Member, that a dissertation recently defended at the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, by Gregory Jones-Katz, devotes a whole chapter to the beginnings of our school. In the near future, we plan to add some further detail to our website to shed light on this illustrious history, using as much testimony and documentation as former directors, faculty, visitors, and participants are willing and able to provide.

From its inception, SCT has played an important role as an annual scholarly and intellectual platform on which the drama of the somewhat fruitless theory wars and the questionable virtue of vain polemics is resolutely sidestepped or "slowed down." Instead a climate of rigorous investigations and courteous debate of "themes out of school," as Stanley Cavell once aptly called them, is both honored and fostered. In the best tradition of

critical and comparative studies across a wide variety of historical and literary fields as well as empirical and visual disciplines, the School invites thinkers who cherish the life of the mind, the force of the better argument, and the courage of imagination, while never forgetting the concrete political responsibilities that more abstract reflections entail.

Beyond the infatuation with identities and cultures, national literatures and cosmopolitanisms, humanisms and antihumanisms, old and new historicisms and their opposing structuralisms, close or distant reading, mind or matter, beings and things, SCT seeks out forms of undogmatic inquiry into modes and moods of genuine thinking and practice that are both analytical and constructive, meditative and deeply engaged. Its mission, if one can say so, is the pursuit of a certain intellectual style and to foster modes of non-criteriological knowledge, well-beyond method.

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—it 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 prejudice its outcomes. The mind and heart learn to wander, the body follows, and—professionally and politically, perhaps even, spiritually—in the very exercise of this freedom, we all the more grow. Not that anything goes, but much does.

There have been some significant changes this last Spring semester in our administrative staff that deserve mentioning here in this Newsletter. It speaks to the exemplary professionalism and great competence of the Cornell

administration and that of the Society for the Humanities that this transition, though momentous, has been swift and smooth.

In the recent years, Mary Ahl, our former Administrative Manager for SCT and for the Society for the Humanities, Alice Cho, our former SCT Program Administrator, have served the School wonderfully, with kind efficiency and grace. Yet, this early Spring, Mary Ahl let us know that she intended to fulfill her plan to retire after over thirty years at the end of May. Deeply grateful for her tremendous contribution and while saddened by her departure, Professor Timothy Murray, Director of the Society for the Humanities, and I, in my role as Director of SCT, were pleased and fortunate to learn that the College at Cornell had permitted us to conduct a double promotion.

Paula Epps-Cepero, who for many years had been the Society's Program Administrator, was found willing to step into Mary's management position, responsible for the Society and SCT, beginning June 1, 2016. And Emily Parsons, who had been the Building and Events Coordinator downstairs in the A.D. White House, was found willing to move upstairs to be the Society's Program Administrator, succeeding Paula. Emily will continue to assist SCT during the summer session in the same capacity as Paula did in the past. Emily, in turn, was succeeded by Sarah Hennies, who is now our Building and Events Coordinator and makes sure that our receptions and other events take their orderly course.

Alice Cho, moreover, informed us in March that she had accepted another job and promotion at Cornell. She is now the Assistant to the Chair of the Department of Statistical Science. And while she, too, is dearly missed as she had been so instrumental to our operation, we were exceptionally lucky to have an efficient and extremely successful search to quickly replace her in the best possible way. We were very happy to learn that James (Jim) Utz Jr., was found willing to succeed Alice as our SCT Program Coordinator, a job to which he brings unique new skills, a vast amount of experience in the Cornell administration, and a distinct intellectual gusto and interest. He combines his new central role with his ongoing involvement as

the Graduate Field Assistant of Cornell's Medieval Studies Program and has proven to be a wonderful addition to our team. Jim took over his current role only a few weeks before this summer's session and has already become the reliable backbone of our small operation, offering the Director wise and frank counsel and assistance where and when needed.

It has been a joy a great privilege to work with Paula, Jim, Emily, and Sarah as members of our superb staff, without whom nothing we do and enjoy would have been possible, just as we have also been very fortunate to continue have a yearly Cornell Student Assistant. During the summer of 2016, Isabella Crowley helped us out on numerous scores, setting up audio-visual equipment, taking photos for our Facebook page, brainstorming about a future remake of our website.

We hope you will all continue to give us your frank feedback and creative suggestions for improving the program in all of its facets. As an alumnus/alumna of SCT you are very much part of an ongoing conversation, and, yes, we do allow participants to come back in the future.

Do join us at the SCT reception at the MLA annual convention meeting, early next year in Philadelphia, if you happen to be there. Do keep us posted of your ongoing and future projects. I know that intellectual friendships and more have been forged over these long weeks and fidelity to such events remains an integral part of this every genuine scholarly happening.

Finally, please take note of the promising line-up of faculty and guest lecturers for 2017, listed on page 2. Full information about the upcoming session and the SCT can be found on our website (<http://sct.cornell.edu>).

#### ANNUAL SCT RECEPTION AT MLA

The annual SCT reception at the MLA will be held on Saturday, January 7th, 2017 from 7:00-8:15pm in Room Franklin 1, Philadelphia Marriott. 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!

## Reflections on SCT 2016

I began the School of Criticism and Theory 2016 with some trepidation. I was long out of graduate school, and wary of being surrounded once again with that special kind of posturing that masks fear. I had a veteran teacher's distrust of jargon. And I was an underemployed parent of two, so six weeks dedicated to studying recent developments in critical theory felt downright self-indulgent. I figured I would take part in a limited way from my perch on the periphery.

Thus I was all the more charmed when the SCT participants I met were on the whole unaffected, warm, hardworking, and engaged. And instead of the jargon-filled cant I had feared being subjected to, I saw high-powered theorists candidly engaged in the business of bringing words "back to a context in which they are alive," as Stanley Cavell has said. I observed speakers who had toured the world but who were still willing to think on their feet—to make a thousand small adjustments to their arguments in front of our eyes.

I was taken aback, then reassured, then thrilled when Director Hent de Vries' initial surprising offer to come and speak with him personally about our own work turned out to be genuine; when this first princely act rightly

predicted our Director's extraordinary ability to somehow understand and speak to the real concerns of each one of us; when Hent's unstinting dedication to explicating and contextualizing the professional contributions of our core faculty members and visiting distinguished guests—demonstrated, for example, by his inspired 20 minute introductions of their lectures, each of which fluently, imaginatively and in singing prose identified the underlying logic of our visitors' intricate, sometimes labyrinthine, always multiple books of

**“The weeks turned out to be not self-indulgent but essential — full of work I hadn't known I needed to do.”**

criticism—proved to be only one part of his astonishing ability to both coordinate and substantively contribute to SCT's extended intellectual adventure.

As with any joint venture, any event composed of moving human parts, there were of course small disappointments—missed opportunities, less-than-satisfying discussions. And the greatest pleasure of SCT—its profusion of thinkers and readings and talks—is also its peculiar burden. But rather than simply feeling overwhelmed by the excess, the endless opportunities for thinking, I came to see

how the special structure of SCT provides its own safeguard. I hadn't properly understood how the 6-week seminars were both interrupted and fed by the mini-seminars; how the mini-seminars extended and helped to reconceive the lectures; how the lectures were shattered (and rebuilt) during the colloquia; how rifts begun in the colloquiums could be healed by the closing faculty panel. And if there were days when I felt inundated or even besieged by the thoughts and arguments of others, there were, too, many moments of exquisite privacy, moments when all those influences were silenced by a voice recognizably my own.

In the end I happily neglected my kids. I rejoiced in the desertion of my usual

round of duties. The weeks turned out to be not self-indulgent but essential—full of work I hadn't known I needed to do. I think that this is connected to the way that 'theory,' done rightly, isn't in fact separate from or incidental to the concerns of everyday life. Theory is or ought to be a series of transfiguring spiritual exercises, practiced alone and in company with others, to the very great benefit of us all.

K.L. Evans  
Independent Scholar



*SCT welcoming reception*

From the first reception to the last dinner, I, like everyone else at SCT, kept asking myself: what are we doing here? What is this thing that is theory? (Or criticism? Or, for that matter, a summer school?) In the graduate school milieu, theory is too easy an identity to adopt (“some people are Victorians, I’m the resident theoryhead”). But what does it mean to do it, after all? How do we read, write, speak theory and about theory?

Here’s an answer straight out of the “Machiavelli” syllabus.

If theory is an archive of evidence for how others have thought, to read theory is to engage that archive. Warren Breckman’s course was essentially a reception history: after an initial immersion in the world of early modern Florence (unfamiliar to all but one of us), we followed contemporary academic debates and revolutionary visions, searching for traces of Machiavelli’s thought. We watched his images and ideas resurface or solidify into minor traditions. The image of the void, for example: so ubiquitous in theories of radical democracy that it became the seminar’s favorite in-joke (the possibilities are endless: “We searched for democracy and found the void!” etc). Yet Machiavelli’s texts are too rich in brilliant and distinct illuminations to be preserved dogmatically, to the letter. So even as the void and the infamous prince had occupied our conversations, many other ideas grew fainter and were forgotten: Machiavelli’s animal metaphors, for

example, or his detailed taxonomy of human societies.

This process of gain and loss - ideas develop, ideas are aborted, ideas go dormant - is the very process of engaging theory. To tap into the theory archive cannot be only about the accumulation of a toolkit or a library of references. To quote Warren’s last statement (which means admitting to having kept a record of Breckman quips - and I’m sure I’m not the only one), theory should not be “an instrumentalized guide to how to do your own research.”

You begin focused and organized when you make the decision to enter the theory archive, but the process immediately gets away from you. If it doesn’t, it has and you just haven’t noticed. Permit me a facile Machiavellian metaphor, in the spirit of our seminar’s coffee breaks: theory is perhaps less of an archive than a lush and varied landscape through which flows the river of Fortune. To engage with theory, then, would mean to live within it, neither floating passively along nor deluding yourself into taking control of its whims.

This is the impossible answer to my problem of relationship to theory that SCT gave me. Enter this space of questioning and try to live. If you thought you could make it work for yourself, watch it overwhelm you. If you thought you could accumulate a little archive of your own, watch things spill over and get away, at once too much and lacking.

The SCT experience, mental and affective and bodily, has essentially rearranged my relationship to theory. I realized quickly that there was no sense in trying to capture it by rushing in and stuffing my days with texts or conversations. I had to create space for all of the elements of the school to combine in contingent and aleatory Althusserian ways, to let it all fall over me, happen around me, and affect me. In short, I had to practice “impatient reading” (a term of Sean Seeger’s coinage; himself no impatient reader, Sean has a knack for snappy definitions, so here I am instrumentalizing his wit.) Neither suspicious nor reparative, an impatient reader does not interrogate the text or smother it with care, but lets the text be.

SCT has turned me into a reader at once more patient and more impatient than I had been before: a reader who can let things go, knowing not all of them will stick, but one that lets herself get caught on things and trusts that there is something there of value: insight or pain or connection, rewards for attempting the impossible feat of paring down and buying in. The image of young Breckman in a tent reading Levi-Strauss. Reaching out to Nicole across the classroom out of a shared love for Ranciere. All of us, trying to figure out how to be people together, walking through traces of Earth’s ancient history, riddled by poems joys despairs, breathing, breathless.

Irina Sadovina  
Centre for Comparative Literature,  
University of Toronto



SCT social events at A.D. White House



SCT participants at social events

It is impossible for me to describe the experience of Renata Salecl's seminar, "The Right to Ignorance: Psychoanalysis and Secrets in Times of Surveillance," without first referencing its setting. Ithaca, New York is remarkable in many respects. The residential area surrounding the Cornell campus is the sort of place where guerilla marketers place stickers with messages like "Eat More Kale" without any trace of irony. In fact, I noted that exact sticker each day when walking the steep hill to Cornell University. It was on the railing overlooking one of a system of waterfalls decorating the campus. A net stretches out below the railing, partially obscuring the view.

There are things we do not want to see because to look at them hurts. However, sometimes, those terribly painful things that we do not want to see or hear or say must be examined, often for the very reasons which make them so painful to consider in the first place.

Salecl directed us to return to Freud and then Lacan so as to consider the origins and structures of our psychologies, why we say (or don't say) and think what we do (or don't). Why are some ideas parenthetical, and why are some never written down to begin with? Before our seminar even met, we had heard a lecture by Stanley Fish, "Freedom of Speech Is Not an Academic Value." Key points included observations that universities are not democratic institutions, that freedom of inquiry and freedom of speech are not synonymous, and that the institution of the liberal arts as a

discipline be unmade. He added during subsequent discussion that academics interested in professional longevity would do well to teach the discrete material of their respective curricula and leave aside commentary on the workings of the world outside the walls of their "citadel." In doing so, Fish gifted the 2016 SCT with the kind of outrage that transcends the boundaries that so often hinder interdisciplinary discourse. The outrage cultivated more than a few conversations concerning how each of us is to be an academic, a theorist, a critic, and also a person in the world. Those conversations have proven to be of rapidly escalating relevancy over the past few months. What should—what can—we say, and when, and where? Sometimes, the work of the critical theorist has more material pertinence than its stereotype suggests.

Salecl also directed our attention to Foucault's 1981 lectures printed in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*. Foucault speaks of Oedipus the King and his incredible blindness and how his blindness blighted his society. He also speaks of avowal, a form of truth-telling. Avowals are confessions where the truth teller submits by command. Tiresias was asked to speak and spoke reluctantly. Although he is Apollo's double and tells the truth, even the chorus doubts him. The truth would only be believed when a slave, bound and threatened with torture, speaks from his experience. In this way, at least one variation of truth-telling occurs when power forces it out. How is it then possible to speak truth to power?

One of the most enduring notions to

come from our seminar on ignorance was articulated on our last day. Kristen T. Wright presented and lead discussion on the subject of white ignorance, referencing Charles W. Mills' chapter in *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. We arrived at the observation that the affective responses of white people do nothing to ameliorate systemic racial oppression and, in fact, often work to perpetuate both active and passive strains of ignorance. There is instead a need for rational, ethically-grounded, and materially effective anti-racism. Furthermore, this need is as present within our citadel as without, made apparent in personal experiences and the epistemologies of racism undeniably present in the intellectual tradition.

We gaze around us through coloured lenses and from particular vantages, each view obscured by some kind of "net." Psychoanalysis has taught us that it is impossible to know everything about our own minds, so no one can tell "the whole truth." We can, however, remain aware that, even in this time of surveillance, not everything is known and not everything is or even can be recorded. With that awareness, we can be more attentive to the economy of knowledges and perhaps be better equipped to cultivate those most vital.

Mary Marley  
Southern Illinois University

Draw a new circle. In his 1841 essay, "Circles," Ralph Waldo Emerson incites his readers to consider the illimitability of nature and the fluid emanation of life. We learn that there is "no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us" but rather a succession of circles infinitely drawn. For the participants of Branka Arsić's magnificent seminar on "Material Life: Vitalism from Spinoza to Deleuze," life was hosted in us, arranging us into one brain that pulsed with rapid-fire cerebrations. We became a bundled composition of life lines: thinking together, living together with our enlightened mentors, with exceptional keynotes, and with the waterfalls and Sugar Maples that surrounded us during our six-week remedial immersion into critical theory.

The illustrative figures that inhabited our readings — from the image of the fish in the water (and the water in the fish) in Leibniz's infinite analysis, to the moody tempest of Poe's gloomy furniture in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and the contemplative intonations of the lily of the field that sings the glory of the elements in Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* — provided us with tantalizing

material (in every sense of the word) to consider the expansive purview of life's endowments.

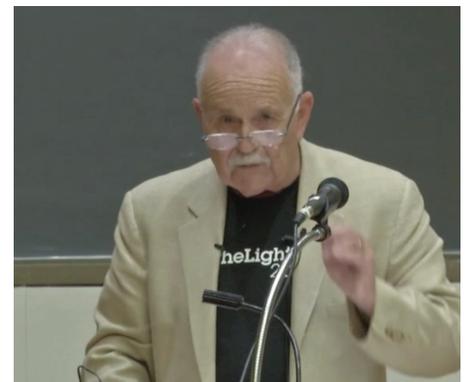
Other texts, including Quentin Meillassoux's rigorous critique of Kantian transcendentalism in *After Finitude*, Henry David Thoreau's ruminative nature treatise, *Walden*, and Giorgio Agamben's philosophy of modal ontology in *The Use of Bodies*, aroused us to contemplate the basis for this profusion of vitalisms in and through philosophy and literature. Life, as it turns out, is exceedingly difficult to think — even as we live, so often, without thinking.

Yet through our enrolment in an invigorating program of events, the participants of SCT lived remarkably well, meeting together to debate the methods of madness in W.J.T. Mitchell's iconomaniac visual project, to discuss Renata Salacl's provocative case studies of criminal justice through the lens of psychoanalysis, to explore the implications of social democratic activism and the contingency of crowds in Warren Breckman's analysis of the Occupy movement, and to consider the metaphysics of oysters in Branka Arsić's profound reading of Herman Melville's classic *Moby Dick*. In all of these

moments, we became acquainted with the lived dimension of intensive thought: we were exhausted in mind and body in our deliberations, just as soon as we were filled with renewed energy to apply ourselves once again to the urgent call of our individual and collective research projects.

What I am left with most distinctly is a sense that theory, like life, is in a constant state of re-creation. It is, as Branka emphasized in the final faculty panel, about making sense of theory in our own time. What are the dimensions of our lived experience today, in politics, in aesthetics? How does life itself organize and mobilize thought? How does thought evolve, transmutate, and impart new meanings in a world that is in a state of invariable flux? It is our task to participate in the genesis of alternative concepts and to remain in indefatigable pursuit of dynamic practices that lend meaning and purpose to our lives. In our academic and personal occupations, we are resolutely called upon to draw a new circle.

Sarah Bezan  
The University of Alberta



SCT public lectures (clockwise from top left): Sandra L. Bermann; Timothy Murray; Diana Sorensen; Stanley Fish; Sharon Cameron; Matthew Engelke

When I arrived in Forest Home, a quiet corner of Ithaca shaded by tall trees and overlooking Beebe Lake, the tiredness I felt from my 2am start in Oxford, flight from London Heathrow, and five-hour journey on the Greyhound bus from New York City was forgotten, and replaced by heightened attention. It was not only the attentiveness required to make sure that my body, which began the day in a small flat 3,434 miles away, ended it here, in this beautiful apartment overlooking a rocky, tree-lined gorge, but also a sense of apprehension at the extensive and challenging reading list for Branka Arsić's SCT seminar, "Material Life: Vitalism from Spinoza to Deleuze."

I had begun to look over the material the week before, and as I walked the lakeside path that led to campus the next afternoon, I reflected that, according to what I had learned from Thoreau's *Walden*, Beebe Lake might be more properly referred to as a "pond," as that word is used in American English. An osprey soaring over the treetops, circling the lake, and diving talon-first into the water interrupted such banal observations, however. Instantly put in mind of Homeric omens, my apprehension increased when it came up without a fish, and I continued my walk to the SCT welcome picnic slightly nervous, excited, and thoroughly awed by the beauty of my surroundings. The perfect state of mind, I now realise, for what was to follow.

Director Hent de Vries's welcome address was long and thorough, like an expository scene from one of Shakespeare's history plays. A list thanking administration staff

past and present was read out like an obscure line of medieval kings, though this genealogy of the School of Criticism and Theory proved equally essential, demonstrating that this wonderful institution was founded on the work of staff, both academic and administrative, that was unfailingly attentive and thoughtful. At the picnic I also learned that the SCT experience would include excellent food, delicious local beers and wines, and around a hundred brilliant students and academics from all over the world, all equally excited to work hard and learn something new.

Branka Arsić began her first seminar by acknowledging that three hours was a long time to talk, and that we ought to agree to have a break at the halfway point, in order not to overdo it. This plan was enacted in the first session, but abandoned by the second, and for all the sessions thereafter, as we were treated to intense, unbroken discussion and fascinating explanations that routinely overran by at least an hour. Fittingly for a seminar largely about affect, Branka stressed the importance of maintaining both the momentum of the discussion and the mood in the room, and each seminar indeed became a highly wrought network of encounters in which our modes and habits of thought were challenged and reshaped.

Tracing an intellectual history of non-dualist, vitalist ontology, we read Spinoza and his antecedents in classical philosophy, and eighteenth-century scientific treatises by Thomas Percival and Richard Watson, before embarking on a fascinating transatlantic detour. The ideas explored in the preceding philosophical and scientific works are

preserved in the innovations of the great writers of the American nineteenth-century, works by Dickinson, Poe, Thoreau, Melville and Emerson that explore the potential of language as a vital phenomenon rather than as straightforward information, as practice rather than theory. Then it was back across the pond to look at Gilles Deleuze, a writer whose suggestive sentences began to resolve into a rigorous and consistent corpus when put into conversation with its proper intellectual genealogy.

There were many other ideas covered in the seminar, and in the wider academic environment – mini-seminars by visiting academics, public lectures, colloquia in which we could hear and discuss the work of the other seminar leaders, each seminar group bringing their own lens to the work of the others. And there was a joyful, exciting, and interesting social world – visits to the Ithaca Museum of the Earth, the beautiful Cornell Ornithology Lab bird reserve, and a regular Friday night view of the red and orange surface of Jupiter through the historic observatory telescope on Cornell's north campus. And there was Ithaca's incredible summer greenery and rich wildlife – skunks ambling down pathways, deer strolling through downtown, red-tailed hawks glaring, indifferently, from the fence of the athletics field. I saw the osprey almost daily, circling the lake, and, to the relief of my Homeric superstitions, catching many fish.

Will Long  
University of Oxford



SCT Events (from left to right): SCT public lecture; colloquium with Branka Arsić

## THE 40th ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE OF THE SCHOOL OF CRITICISM AND THEORY

download the full program from the April 2016 meeting [here](#)

As I reflect on my SCT experience back in downstate Illinois, debates rage over the recent welcome letter John Ellison—Dean of Students in the College, University of Chicago—wrote to incoming undergraduates. This summer, Stanley Fish delivered the inaugural SCT public lecture, entitled “Freedom of Speech is Not an Academic Value”. Longtime colleague and friend, W. J. T. Mitchell introduced Fish, calling him “the best kind of irritant ... writing essays that everyone wants to disagree with.” In the weeks following the Fish lecture, his name was often invoked, sometimes (often?) in irritated tones; Mitchell characterized his friend well.

W. J. T. “Tom” Mitchell led the seminar, “Seeing Madness: Insanity, Media, and Visual Culture,” which was largely based on his recent work and current book project. On the first day, Mitchell asked us, what is madness? What defines this amorphous term? As we talked, he jotted on the chalkboard, creating a collective swirl of words around “madness” in the center. It both clarified and obfuscated the endeavor, revealing the word’s multivalent character. Each of us utilized the term differently, confident in its implications yet also slowly realizing that our use of the term may need conceptual clarification for each scholarly project—no small task. Attendees from variety of fields and global locations filled our seminar, including (but not limited to) history, philosophy, literature, art history, media studies, creative writing, and landscape architecture, the latter being my discipline. In the following weeks we read authors that grappled with notions of madness from a range of western perspectives: Plato, Foucault, Derrida, Freud, William Blake, Erving Goffman, John Seward, Friedrich Kittler, and Georges Didi-Huberman, amongst others. We staged a Foucault/Derrida debate one day, revisiting their respective

assertions about Descartes, philosophy, and premises within History of Madness that shaped the contentious rift between the two for years.

Weekly film screenings occurred in a larger room; I attended most of them. The post-film discussions were usually lively, especially the ones following *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), *A Page of Madness* (1926), *Titicut Follies* (1967), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Asylum* (1972), *The Devils* (1971), and *Shutter Island* (2010). Maybe these films stuck out in my mind because they powerfully utilize spatial relations in documentary and fictional depictions of mental states. In both the seminar and his public lecture, Mitchell showed his son Gabriel’s short film *Crazy Talk: What is Mental Illness?* (2011), which conveys his subjective view of schizophrenia as well as meditations/critiques of narratives surrounding mental illness writ large. While *Seeing Madness* (the current book project by Mitchell) is intensely academic, it is also deeply personal: Gabriel’s schizophrenia and subsequent death have profoundly informed Mitchell’s thinking, which he explicitly states when presenting.

Mitchell’s teaching style is improvisational, in the moment yet far reaching, ethereal, theoretical, and personal. He always lunched with students after class, chatted with us during breaks, held office hours frequently, and shared Critical Inquiry swag (T-shirts!). The seminar culminated in a group Bilderatlas project, inspired by the work of art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) in his Mnemosyne Atlas boards. (Warburg was also schizophrenic.) Each student contributed one image that reflected an aspect of madness, which ultimately reflected that person’s interests or research, much like the Warburg boards did.

Of course SCT is much more than the

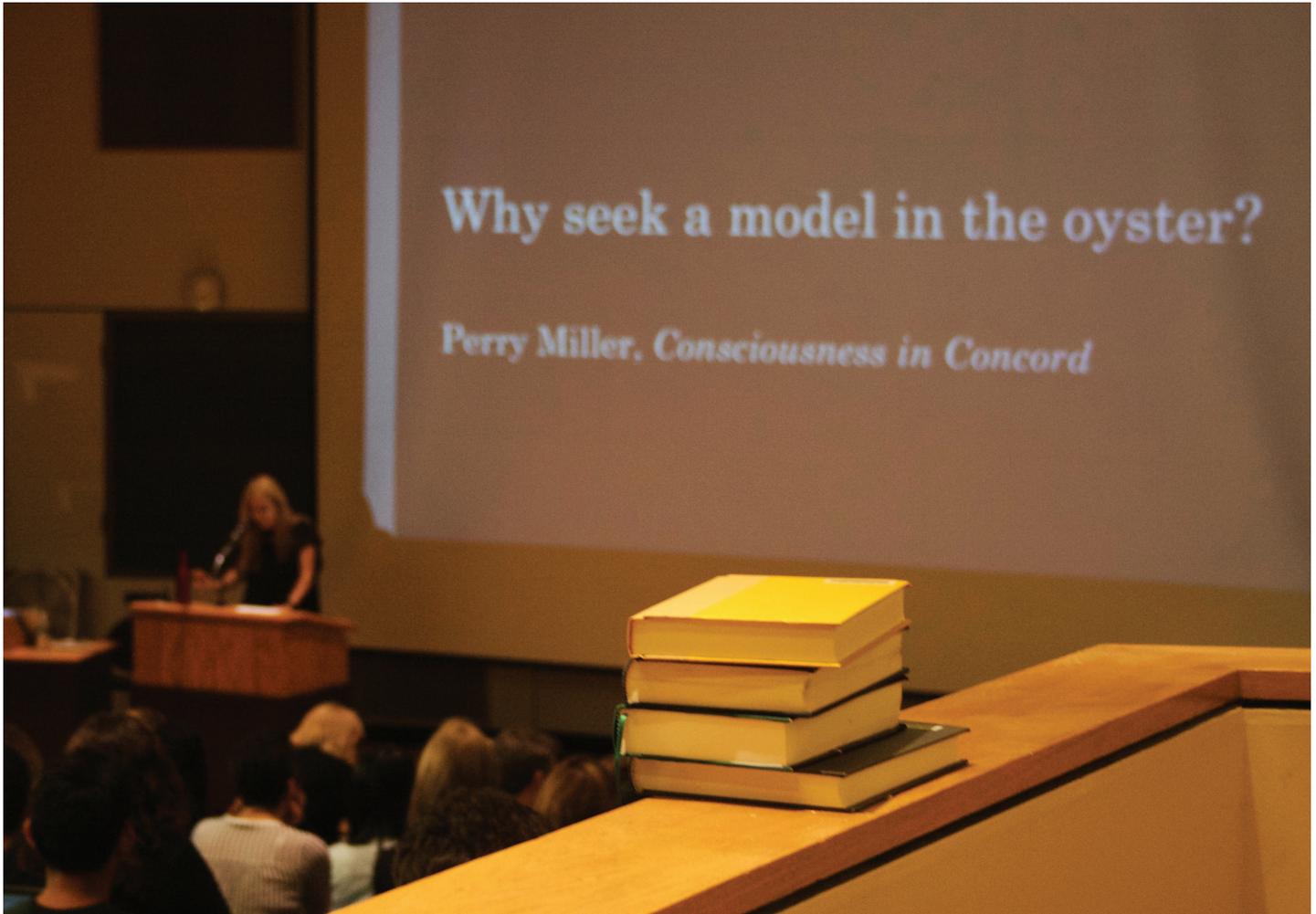
primary seminar one attends. Events featuring Branka Arsic, Sandra Bermann, Warren Breckman, Renata Salecl, and Timothy Murray were particularly useful to me. Weekly receptions at the A. D. White House enabled everyone to mingle with participants and leaders from other seminars. Bonds formed quickly and people explored the campus, gorges, downtown Ithaca, and Cayuga Lake together. The picnic at Taughannock Falls State Park was fun; the food was good, some people swam, and as the sun set, we all walked to the bottom of the falls for the annual SCT group picture. It was nearly dark when we arrived. Steep, rocky walls enveloped the viewing platform; however, the regional drought reduced the water to nearly a trickle over the falls, which usually has a more boisterous flow and mist.

Summer is often a time when academics catch up on various projects, attending SCT can make that challenging. The reading load and schedule is intense—as it should be. Temporarily pushing my dissertation writing partly to the side, I immersed myself into the SCT experience, revisiting theoretical approaches, learning diverse disciplinary strategies, and interacting with a delightful array of incredibly talented people, all of which will inform my current work on nineteenth-century New York State insane asylum landscapes.

Jennifer Thomas  
University of Illinois at Urbana-  
Champaign

### 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 James Utz, Program Administrator, [sctcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu](mailto:sctcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu).



SCT public lecture by Branka Arsić

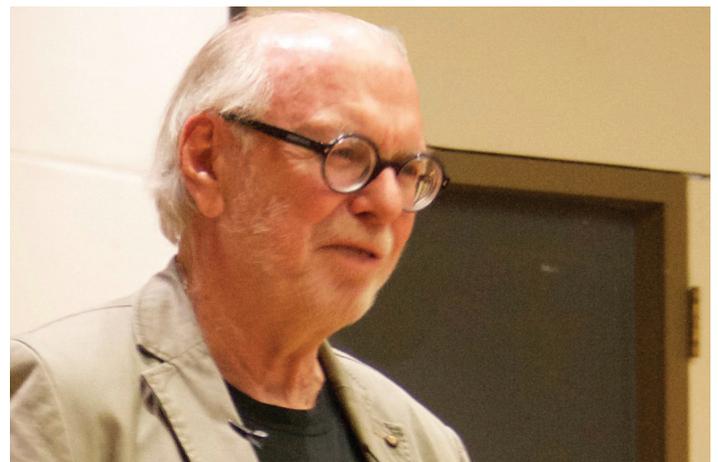
This summer, in the fortieth iteration of Cornell SCT, participants in Professor Renata Salecl's seminar came together to deepen their understanding of human relationships, particularly in relation to the symbolic structures of secrets. Ranging beyond discursive fields and disciplinary confines, Renata demonstrated the centrality of psychoanalysis to our comprehension of human fantasies; the unconscious, desire, and drive; what blocks these machinations; and the precise methods of identification. Operating in this expanded field of critical thinking, Renata challenged us to shift our attention from lateral relationships of society and the subject to notions of the unconscious.

We began with one of Freud's most important early texts, *The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person* (1927), a work that questions whether psychoanalysis should be brought under the control

of medical practitioners. Freud's view argued in conversations with an imaginary interlocutor was that psychoanalysis should maintain its autonomy from the medical paradigm, and be self-determining on professionally psychoanalytic grounds. Turning to Freud's study of Negation, the first seminar quickly progressed to an exploration of the mechanisms of judgement. We found that, for Freud, the origin of intellectual function lies in the interplay of primary instinctual impulses. He imagines the act of judging as a continuation of the process by which the ego takes things into itself or expels them according to the pleasure principle. Emphasising the polarity of judgement in the oppositional instincts of affirmation and negation, Freud's theses reveal that the recognition of the unconscious on the part of the ego is expressed in a negative formula. In Freud's own terms, "there is no stronger evidence that we have been successful in our effort to uncover the unconscious than when the patient reacts

to it with words, 'I didn't think that, or 'I didn't (ever) think of that.'"

Reaching beyond Freud and Lacan, seminar participants grappled with a wide arc of central texts by Derrida, Foucault, Fink, Leader, Abraham, Torok, Weizman, Keenan, Ver Eecke, Boyd, and more. Debating fervently from a diversity of approaches grounded in frameworks across disciplines and periods, we engaged with the inter-mediality of secrets and society. On a personal note, the humanity and generosity of my fellow participants, and their willingness to listen, and respectfully to challenge, brought home to me the ways in which the pointed pursuit of theoretical and critical inquiry is embedded in both truth and beauty. Hent de Vries's public lecture, which touched on spiritual exercise as the attempt to attune oneself to the inner self or the soul, as well as to nature – or, more precisely, to the cosmos – resonated deeply with the creative intellectual enterprise of SCT set within the natural



*Six-week seminar leaders (clockwise from top left): Branka Arsić; Warren Breckman; W.J.T. Mitchell; Renata Salecl*

locale of Ithaca's iconic topography.

Over the long summer Renata revitalised our understanding of the importance of psychoanalysis with far reaching consequences. Her critique of the ascendant project of neuroscience parallels Freud's late 1920s provocation of the medical profession. Enlisting psychoanalytic techniques, Renata questioned the compulsive identification with discourses of neuroscience and genetics, especially within the current legal domain. Psychoanalysis, she asserts, opens up the possibility of "think(ing) about the fantasies, the investments we have about science, the belief that science touches the real something in us, more than ourselves, the core of our being." Likewise, WJT Mitchell's seminar, built around the principal problematic of visualising madness, resonated with the Lacanian epistemology of representation as a structured coordination between the psychic orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

Introduced to the primacy of language in the structuring of consciousness, we debated the conscious, unconscious and structural production of the concept of ignorance: the supposed "naturalness" that positions it at the core of knowledge. Through the optic of critical inquiry, we assessed desire and drive in relation to material issues of the game Pokémon Go, the impossible choices of surveillance societies, transgenerational trauma, the gaze, and diverse cultural formations.

Within the kaleidoscope of memories of my sojourn at SCT some experiences are indelibly imprinted on my psyche and will remain there for the rest of my days: the spectacle of the starry sky, fourth of July community fireworks, viewing the rings of Saturn and moons of Jupiter at the Fuertes Observatory. With a nod to Homer and wink to A. R. Ammons (who wrote his post-Odyssean long poem, "Tape for the Turn of the Year," while awaiting a job offer at Cornell), as emerging writers and thinkers based

in a humanist milieu, my journey and those of my fellow participants at Cornell SCT forms the base and truth of our intellectual development. Texts functioned loosely as compass points for navigation, and all else required on the journey was an attitude of openness to receive the plurality of critical thought introduced by fellow participants and faculty members.

Sushma Griffin  
University of Queensland

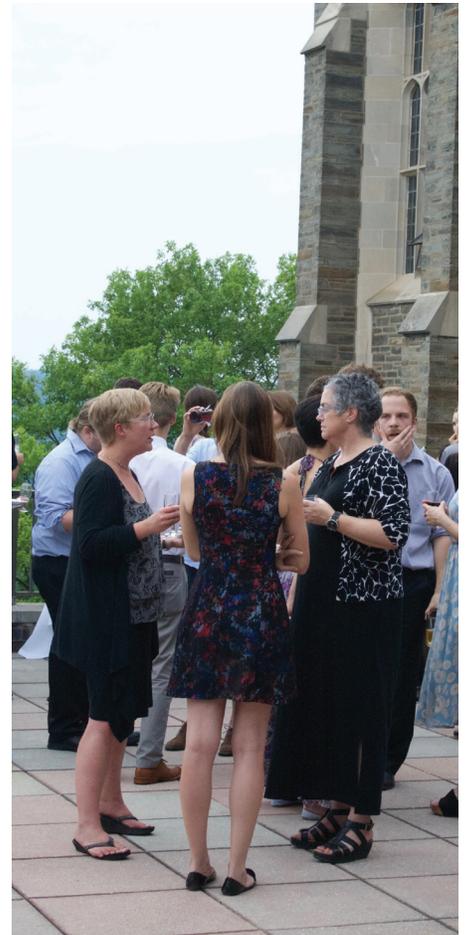
## SCT SOCIAL MEDIA

follow us on Twitter [here](#)

"like" us on Facebook [here](#)



The School of Criticism & Theory  
A.D. White House  
27 East Avenue  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY 14853



*SCT faculty and participants at end-of-session banquet*