

[ENG-7/a, AA-V4a/b, ENG-13, AA-MA1, AA-MA2, AA7, AA11, LAA10, LAA13,
AA-W, AA-WB]
2st. Do 14-16 Phil 1269

Abstraction is a term which tends to be used recurrently in discussions of aesthetic theory, with the following being common attributes of aesthetic abstraction: nonreferentiality, defamiliarization, nonfigurality, and disembodiment. Yet, the notion of abstraction seems to remain rather vague, polyvalent, and ambiguous. In this seminar we will encounter different approaches towards the notion of abstraction in critical cultural theory and aesthetic practice. A guiding question will be how one could conceptualize abstraction in literature. Is literary writing “abstract” per se since it is comprised of language, i.e. an ostensibly abstract system of signs? Are language-based modes of aesthetic practice necessarily more abstract than visual forms of expression for instance? Is any form of semiotic representation already a form of abstraction, as a removal from reality and “the Real”? We will also deal with abstraction in visual art, and ponder possible interrelations between abstract visual art and literature, like between Abstract expressionist painting and New York School poetry for example.

We will try to investigate and complicate theorizations of abstraction critically. Our discussions of abstraction in aesthetic theory and literature will form a starting point, and along the way we will address questions of gendering, racialization, and embodiment. What seems promising in this context is a consideration of abstraction in relation to abjection; abjection in a very basic sense meaning the, often very visceral, rejection of undesired or tabooed materials and objects, but also subjects and entire populations, and the affective valences which are attached to these dynamics. In this seminar you will encounter theorizations of abjection in psychoanalytic theories of psychogenesis, in queer-feminist theories of subjectivation, and in political ontologies in the context of Black Studies for instance.

Embedded in close readings of artistic and theoretical texts and artifacts our discussions will address possibilities of conceptualizing the complex relation between processes of abstraction and abjection. For example, abstract phenomena may be undergirded by the abject, or even constituted by it, whereas the abject in its most visceral forms can be indicative of abstract structural formations. Could the relation between abstraction and abjection be conceivable as complimentary, or rather as oppositional, as dialectical, or perhaps even as a mode of relationality for which we do not have suitable terms yet? These are some of the pressing questions that will keep us occupied in our collaborative intellectual labor throughout the semester.

This seminar will take up a diachronic and trans-genre approach, which means that we will interact with texts, and other artifacts, from various genres, from the 17th century up until the present day. Since this is an American Studies seminar the artistic primary materials will be predominantly North American. This is a selection of some of the (literary) writers whose work we will be reading: Robin Coste Lewis, Dawn Lundy Martin, Felix Bernstein, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, M. NourbeSe Philip, Rinaldo V. Wilson, Toni Morrison, William S. Burroughs, Frank O’Hara, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Elmer Rice, Henry James, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Edward Taylor, Jonathan Edwards. Some of the non-literary artists whose works you will encounter in this seminar are: Kara Walker, Kiki Smith, Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, Cy Twombly, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Jackson Pollock, Ryan Trecartin, Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Ellen Gallagher, Charles Demuth. These are some of the theorists and critics whose approaches towards abstraction and/or abjection will be relevant for our discussions: Sianne Ngai, Daeick Scott, Julia Kristeva, Theodor W. Adorno, Karl Marx, Fred Moten, Judith Butler, Christina Sharpe, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, Moishe Postone, Jacques Lacan.

Credit requirements: Thorough preparation of all reading material, active participation, written reading responses, term paper.