In Theory

A Word from the Director

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 four distinguished faculty for four six-week long seminars, and four one-week mini-seminar leaders. We admit between eighty and one hundred participants, who enroll in one six-week seminar and actively participate in all other events (which include all of the mini-seminars, public lectures, film screenings, spontaneous reading groups, and colloquia with the seminar leaders 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 in 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 2017 the forty-first session of the School of Criticism and Theory convened with eight distinguished faculty members, four prominent public guest lecturers, and a group of just under eighty participants. The majority among them are studying or teaching at North American universities, but others joined us from China and India, Russia and Peru, Palestine and South Korea, and from across Europe, including Sweden, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Together with numerous visitors from within the larger Ithaca community, over the course of long and intensive weeks they 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: Emily Apter, Faisal Devji, Michael Puett, and Carolyn Rouse. During the six weeks, they formed not only a congenial dream-team, discussing their latest thoughts on the theoretical and political ramifications of thinking in untranslatables, the empirical and practical and not merely abstract-moral role played by the idea of humanity, the case made for and against reparations within the wider perspective of social justice, and new ways of conceptualizing religion in cosmopolitan and comparative terms. Rare are the occasions where we get to see eminent scholars think on their feet, witness thought in action, with all the passion and wider institutional and political engagement this so clearly implies. I remember well what it takes to sustain a level of intensity and quality of common readings and discussions over an extended 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: Philippe Descola, Shoshana Felman, Avishai Margalit, and Anthony Vidler, 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 six-week seminars. They ranged from ontological pluralism as anthropological critique to literature and vulnerability, the concept of just war, and psychological and architectural surfaces.

My sincere thanks also go to the visiting public lecturers; Amanda Anderson, Jonathan Culler, Frances Ferguson, and Mariët Westermann, who opened our eyes to motifs and motivations that were altogether different still and added something essential as well. They discussed theory and doxa in contemporary political psychology, recent perspectives on the relationship between narratology and the lyric, deep education, and the humanities in the world. 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 larger group of participants, not only for joining us at SCT this past 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 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 happened 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.

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, 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 Riffterre, 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, former Senior SCT Board Member, with the help of Penelope Deutscher and a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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 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 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.

Jim Utz, our SCT Program Coordinator, has once again been the reliable and friendly backbone of our operation, offering faculty, participants, and the director wise and frank counsel, and making it a such great joy and privilege to work with him.

It has also been a joy and privilege to work with the other members of our superb staff: Paula Epps-Cepero, Administrative Manager for SCT and for the Society for the Humanities; Emily Parsons, the Society’s Program Coordinator; and Sarah Hennies, our Building and Events Coordinator. Their gentle and silent attentiveness to all financial and material conditions of our philosophizing and theorizing cannot be overestimated. As direct representatives of our esteemed hosts—the Society for the Humanities and Cornell University, more broadly—they remind us year after year that we’re very fortunate to use these gorgeous grounds for our summer theory camp.

We have also been very fortunate to continue have a yearly Cornell Student Assistant. During the summer of 2017, Lilian Garrido helped us out on numerous scores, including setting up audio-visual equipment and taking photos for our Facebook page.

We hope you will all continue to give us your earnest feedback and creative suggestions for improving the program in all its facets. As an alumnum/alumna of SCT you are very much part of an ongoing conversation, as we see it. 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 New York, if you happen to be there. And do keep us posted of your ongoing and future projects. I know that intellectual friendships and more have been forged over the course of the program. And fidelity to such events remains an integral part of this very genuine scholarly happening, as we conceive it.

Finally, please take note of the promising line-up of faculty and guest lecturers for 2018, listed on page 2. Full information about the upcoming session and the SCT can be found on our website: http://sct.arts.cornell.edu.

The annual SCT reception at the MLA will be held on Saturday, January 6th, 2018 from 7:15-8:30pm in the Empire Ballroom West, Sheraton New York Times Square. 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!
To begin at the end. In the last hour of our summer together, a visitor arrived and unselfconsciously confided to us: “Theory is pretentious.” Such a confident clarion call could make theorists into carriages. What hope for our sense of our efforts in the past six weeks (and to be sure, before and after that season), and what hope for yours as you make plans to head to theory camp? Indeed, what hope for theory as we’ve known it?

In an age that has been said to mark “the end of theory,” when theory might be deemed a footnote to history (a phase, at best), and when it is met with cyclical bursts of antagonism (or more worryingly, a perpetual atmosphere of contempt), it is something of a miracle, and at least an anomaly, that we can invoke the existence of The School of Criticism and Theory—that it exists at all. At a time when the Humanities is under siege, when reading has become evacuated of its postmodern cachet (replaced by TLDR), we may ask where one can undertake the work of theory and criticism, and to what end. For years now, finding a home at Cornell University—havens also for the Society for the Humanities and diacritics—we might call such a place a Summer Camp for Theorists.

As a quick, cursory reply to the present situation—as if sending a postcard from camp, I’d like to say something small—something about how the syntagmas “summer camp” and “theory camp” resolve themselves in the sui generis phenomenon known as SCT.

Camp. Camping. We begin with the terrestrial conditions of the camp itself: Ithaca, New York in summertime; the Cornell campus perched atop a hill overlooking one of the Finger Lakes; fresh water for swimming; verdant, fragrant forests and gorges for hiking; wineries, breweries, farmers markets, barbeques, camp fires, and abundant varieties of local ice cream.—With all this sensorial pleasure, who needs theory? The camp itself is well-provisioned. Let us, instead, vacation.

Yet it is in relation to these auspicious physical, material conditions that the virtues of theory camp present themselves. In addition to one’s core seminar, there are private colloquia, public lectures, complementary (“mini”) seminars, office hours, and social events; thus, there are occasions for refined thought, but also rough working notions, relaxed off-the-record confabulations, and much else. Theory is not one thing.

Camp. Campus. And why not also acknowledge the camp that revels in artifice and conjures frivolity? Indeed, Susan Sontag identifies pretentiousness as a signature trait of camp, and points to a “seriousness that fails”; “camp is playful, anti-serious” (1964). Yet, if theory camp can present itself as the camp of the campus and not of the comic, its pretentions to seriousness, and the presence of sincerity, must abide. Theory cannot be deemed a footnote to history (a put-on, a make-believe, a realm of pretend postulations), but instead genuinely enacted in language, in speech, in writing, in the conversation that occupies our days and nights.

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With the vast bulk of Cornell students elsewhere, the busy Ivy League (and Public) campus becomes a temporary site for the establishment of a camp—to consider the broader place and purpose of the university but with fewer demands and distractions. In the quad, at camp, we create a new horizon for thinking. Thinking in one’s summer hours.

Jacques Derrida himself wrote about the place years ago, and in prescient terms that frame our present (and future) situation in the humanities, in theory: as theorists, we “may attempt to define new responsibilities in the face of the university’s put-on-subjection to the technologies of informatization” (1983, 14). Years later, when Wendy Brown came to write Undoing the Demos in the A. D. White House, in her own temporary perch at the top of East Hill, encamped for a term, she would still be dwelling on the capital basis of the university’s raison d’être and the hope that the humanities might survive the onslaught of economic transfiguration carried out by an ever-expanding neoliberal regime. For Derrida, “[i]t would be the responsibility of a community of thought for which the frontier between basic and oriented research would no longer be secured” (16). Peirce’s invocation of a “community of inquirers” comes to mind as a sibling gesture—and one that takes us away from the need to define or defend the grander ambitions (“vision,” “mission,” “values”) of the university, and instead—in the quiet of the quad, in the warmth by the water, in the rain of long summer days, to hold-up in our camp and contemplate. What are we doing? How are we thinking? These questions need not range beyond the seminar table or cheese plate, and yet do, they will persist, as the lessons of camp necessarily find their way to campus, and then to all the hours and places that one occupies thereafter. Camp is transformative: that is its vision, its mission, its value.

Camp is a temporary place, yet it is—it must be—a place that one makes into one’s home. For a day or two, or six weeks. And thus one’s ideas—as Thoreau illustrated at Walden Pond, or Muir in the Sierra Nevada, or Darwin above Valparaiso—are site specific. Camping for thinking seems a kindred and compelling variation on Heidegger’s “building dwelling thinking,” for, after all, we are endlessly seeking a camp to belong to or to create—to find a space for thinking when it seems like thinking is not what is called for (or forth) from us. “Knowing is the cessation of thinking,” remarked Marina Popova, and thus the mindset (and disposition) of the camper is ideal for thinking—an endless “onward thinking,” as Emerson put it.

The community of the seminar—of the well-named participants—is mirrored by the hospitality of the director and his team: Hent de Vries & Co. coordinate a masterfully rich, synecdoced schedule, and this includes engaging the resident scholars at the camp as well as a generous bevy of visitors—all of them drawn into the special orbit of the camp while the university is in ebb mode.
As with all camp/camping/campus experiences, there are vacant moments, moments of being overwhelmed (and under-), moments that demand stamina, and still others that likely yield an uncontrollable surplus of scintillating potential. But these rallies and deflations, insights and disappointments, periods of intensity and laxity, are part of being at camp, being a good camper, being on campus. There are lessons to be had at all these intervals. Theory camp, in a word, is not vacation, but a place set aside for the heeding of a call, as part of one’s response to a vocation.

Now to return to the beginning at the end. Admittedly, I was troubled—if also darkly amused—by our visitor’s reaffirmation of theory’s demise, and therefore the prospect of its dismissal (from camp, from campus). The drama would become tragedy: dedicating a life to theory, to the struggle for it and after it, only to see it all dissolve in one’s hands (Wittgenstein, doubtless, long ago, gave us an out and we merely turned it into a new domain for theorizing). The theorists, at last, were “too dogged,” “they lacked fantasy” (Sontag).

Yet, it was hours spent in the company of seminarians—Apterians, for our topoi—that gave me a genuine space for solace. I thought of how theory itself is an endless translation because it is a perpetual interpretation. When we take this proposition into the realm of “philosophizing in languages” (as Barbara Cassin has described her project), we are negotiating further unsure, unsettling passages: in a word, how can we speak with any confidence about what makes the journey from one language to another—and more broadly, from one locus of theoria to another, from one camp to another? As Derrida also said: “it is always difficult to read what does not let itself be translated” (2002, 17).

What is missing, what is lost, what gets left behind—and perhaps also, more hopefully, what can be found as a point for re-finding and renewing theory—in the notion that “theory is pretentious”? One of the rare places that creates the conditions for a reply to such questions is the Summer Camp for Theorists.

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