

## Understanding What You Want: Desire and Culture

Aaron Schuster

### Course Description

Is culture what we do? Or is culture who we are? Culture is everywhere. But what lies beneath the veil? Are we all, as Shakespeare writes famously, “players” on the stage of culture? If so, who is “directing” us? Like inhabitants of the “Matrix,” do we live without knowing it in a culture dictated by other people’s desires—what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the “desire of the Other”? In other words, are we all acting out someone else’s fantasy? How realistic is it to imagine that we could leave these desires implanted by culture behind and live in a fantasy-free world? What would such “reality” be like? Perhaps we already inhabit such a world, and just don’t know it yet.

In this three week course we will journey together into the unconscious of contemporary culture and politics. The course will provide an introduction to such concepts as the ego, superego, and id; pleasure and enjoyment; desire and drive; fantasy and reality; sexuality and repression; identity and alienation; language and the body; society and the individual; and the psychopathologies of everyday life.

Course materials will consist in films and television, popular culture, literature (short stories), artworks, and theoretical essays. We will also make one or more trips to see exhibitions in the city, depending on what is showing in Seoul at the time.

### Instructor

Affiliation: Cornell University

Aaron Schuster (BA Amherst College; MA, PhD Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) is a philosopher and writer, based in Amsterdam. He is the author of *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Short Circuits Series, MIT Press, 2016). His book *Spasm: A Philosophy of Tickling* is forthcoming from Cabinet Books, and he is a co-author, together with Eric Santner and William Mazzarella, of *Sovereignty Inc.: Three Inquiries in Politics and Enjoyment*, to be published in the Trios Series of the University of Chicago Press. He has written on such topics as the history of levitation, the politics of sleep, philosophical conceptions of pleasure and desire, the psychopathology of AI, the debt drive and neoliberalism, the comedy of Lubitsch, Genet’s theater, Kafka’s philosopher dog, Platonov’s Anti-Sexus, and complaining. He has been a fellow at the Theory Department of the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, the Institute for Cultural Inquiry ICI Berlin, and the Institute for Advanced Studies Southeast Europe, Rijeka, Croatia. In 2016, he was a visiting professor at the University of Chicago, at the Center for Disciplinary Innovation, the Franke Institute for the Humanities. He is currently a fellow at the Society for the Humanities, Cornell University.

## Assessment

Two short essays (50%), Participation (25%), Attendance (25%).  
Details will be provided at the first session of the course.

## Syllabus

### WEEK ONE: DESIRE, CULTURE, AND THE SELF

Sigmund Freud, “‘Wild’ Psycho-Analysis”

Adam Phillips, “Against Self-Criticism,” *London Review of Books*, March 5, 2015

Adam Curtis, *Century of the Self* (“There Is a Policeman Inside All Our Heads: He Must Be Destroyed”)

Jorge Luis Borges, “Borges and I”

Darian Leader, *What is Madness?* (selections)

### WEEK TWO: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, ARTIFICIAL NEUROSIS

Ted Chiang, “Silicon Valley Is Turning Into Its Own Worst Fear”

Ted Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*

Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus* (selections)

Pedro Domingos, “Our Digital Doubles: AI will serve our species, not control it,”  
*Scientific American* (2018)

Charlie Booker, *Black Mirror* (episodes)

Shane Carruth, *Upstream Color*

### WEEK THREE: POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics*

Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing*

Materials are subject to revision.

We will also make trips to different art spaces, most likely Artsonje Center, and the Seoul Museum of Art.