

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 sublime 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 (for example, in 2017 we had a guided visit of the Noh Suttgart exhibition at Artsonje Center).

Instructor

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Aaron Schuster is a philosopher and writer, based in Amsterdam. He has written on such topics as the philosophy of tickling, the history of levitation, the comedy of Ernst Lubitsch, the theater of Jean Genet, Franz Kafka's philosopher dog, Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, sexuality and anti-sexuality, the politics of debt, sleeping, corruption, the philosophy of pleasure, and complaining. He has also collaborated as a writer and dramaturge with artists on a number of projects. He was a fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry ICI Berlin, and the Center for Advanced Studies, Rijeka, Croatia, and a visiting professor at the University of Chicago and the University of Amsterdam. His first book, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, was published by MIT Press in 2016. Two other books are forthcoming: *Sovereignty, Inc.: Three Inquiries in Enjoyment and Politics* (with Eric Santner and William Mazzarella, University of Chicago Press); and *Spasm: A Philosophy of Tickling* (Cabinet Books).

Assessment

Essay (no more than 1,000 word) (50%), Participation (30%), Attendance (20%).
Details will be provided at the first session of the course.

Syllabus

WEEK ONE: COMEDY. What can comedy tell us about society, subjectivity, and desire?

Jean Genet, *The Balcony*

Slavoj Zizek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*

Ernst Lubitsch, *Ninotchka*

Ernst Lubitsch, *To Be or Not to Be*

WEEK TWO: MACHINE LOVE. Intelligent machines, erotic robots: What is the future of love?

Andrei Platonov, "The Anti-Sexus"

Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus* (selections)

Charlie Booker, *Black Mirror*, Season 4 Episode 4 "Hang the DJ"

Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*

Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049*

Spike Jonze, *Her*

Shane Carruth, *Upstream Color*

WEEK THREE: CULTURE & POLITICS. Ideology, capitalism, and political trauma.

Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics*

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

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.