

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES THE COOPER UNION

COURSE DESCRIPTIONS FALL 2026

Core Curriculum

HSS-1 – The First-Year Seminar

A literature course concentrating on poetry and drama. Selected texts from antiquity and the Renaissance are common to all sections, with works from other genres, periods and cultures chosen by individual instructors. The course develops aesthetic appreciation of literary texts and encourages a range of critical responses. Through close reading, and extended discussion, students learn to articulate their responses in written and spoken form.

3 credits. Instructor Varies.

HSS-3 – The Making of Modern Society

A study of the key political, social and intellectual developments of modern Europe in a global context. This course is organized chronologically, beginning with the Industrial and French Revolutions. Students develop an understanding of the political grammar and material bases of the present day by exploring the social origins of conservatism, liberalism, feminism, imperialism and totalitarianism. In discussions and in lectures students learn to study and to respond critically in written and spoken form to a variety of historical documents and secondary texts. Students must register for HSS3 L1 as well as one HSS3 section. HSS3 L1 will take place in the Rose Auditorium.

3 credits. Instructor Varies.

Humanities

HUM-250 – Shakespeare: Hamlet

For the fall 2026 semester the elective Shakespeare HUM250 will have a particular focus: Hamlet, the most famous play in the English language, written around 1600 and still very much alive. We meet for three hours once a week. Among the questions we'll explore: where does this play come from? how do we read the play in 2026? what makes Hamlet worth our special attention? how did the play exert its extraordinary influence on the other arts? on us now, today?

We will examine and consider Shakespeare's tragedy with care, but we will also look at ways in which Hamlet (and Hamlet's ghost) continue to be present in culture (film, music, painting, dance, language . . .) In place of a midterm, you will turn in at week 8 a first draft of your 15-page research paper for the course. Final essays are due in week 12. Presentations based on your research will be the core of our final class meetings.

3 credits. William Germano.

HUM-304 – Dance and Society

How do dance practices embody and engage with the social worlds around them? This course examines key

moments of cultural change in twentieth-century America, and how dancers and choreographers responded to, reflected, and reshaped those moments. Taking a broad view of dance, from theatrical to social, classical to experimental, students will develop tools for reading movement and performance in relation to its surrounding culture, and will research artists and movements of their choosing for a final project. Throughout, the course asks how studying the past can reframe our understanding of the present, offering new ways to think about the social changes unfolding in our own time.

3 credits. Buck Wanner.

HUM-327 – History of Cinema: History and Theory of Cinematic Figuration

If body, individual, and person have become an increasingly tighter network of identities in the real world, there is no reason this must be brought into film. “In a movie, a silhouette does not produce a body.” In these words, film theorist and curator Nicole Brenez lays out the singular aesthetic and historical potentials that the moving image presents in its construction of human figures. From Muybridge’s photographic studies of motion in the late 1800s to CGI characters in the present, cinema and its precursors have shaped and reshaped the figure in motion in relation to the ground/background, the voice/speech, and time/duration. Combining readings and screenings, the class pays close attention to the gestural, political, and libidinal economies of cinematic bodies in various states of stasis and motion, and the graphical and narrative systems they produce. In addition to reading a diverse body of writing on the human figure and its representations in cinema, painting, and literature, including texts by Eric Auerbach, Nicole Brenez, T.J. Clark, Siegfried Kracauer, and Jean-Louis Schefer, the course features screenings of films by Charles Burnett, Marguerite Duras, F.W. Murnau, Jacques Tourneur, John Woo, among other filmmakers.

3 credits. Hicham Awad.

HUM-334 – Plato's Republic

A seminar devoted entirely to a close reading and critical analysis of Plato’s greatest dialogue, the Republic, and its reverberations down through the ages as a model of political theorizing, if not a template for an ideal society. As we work through the text book by book, we will create our own “Socratic dialogue,” that is, a series of problems, questions, deliberations, and considerations that would run parallel to the text, with the ultimate aim of assessing what Plato means, and intends, with this enigmatic work. Comparative material in the form of historical and contemporary (to Socrates and Plato) influences, precedents, and references will be introduced where appropriate. We will then venture briefly into the analogous genre of “utopian” literature which the Republic inadvertently engendered, finishing with the most influential modern critique, that of Popper.

3 credits. Mary Stieber.

HUM-356 – Issues in Contemporary Fiction: The Novella

The course looks at creative writing from around the world, post-1950, of a certain length—longer than the short story and shorter than the novel. For some time, these works have been called “novellas.” They are usually described as having between 40,000 -- 70,000 words, or, as one critic wrote, reading one takes about the same time as watching a three-to-five act play. A few of the selections for this semester might be a little longer; we begin with Feneon’s “Novels in Three Lines,” to push the formal questions. Basically, in speaking of the formal questions, a short story should have a cut-glass focus; a novel can draw on the heterogeneity of many years, many characters, many themes. A novella can pull its character(s) through dramatically shifting moments while still maintaining a strong philosophical coherence.

Critics have no problem in listing over a hundred novellas that have become almost essential reading. Our course begins in the mid-20th century and will include works from this century by writers including McCullers, Camus, Ginsberg, J.D. Salinger, Baldwin, Achebe, Dick, Lispector, Morrison, Garcia-Marquez; we will also broach the question of novelizing autobiography, and graphic novels, with Mukasonga and Satrapi.

3 credits. Sohnya Sayres.

HUM-393 – Environmental Ethics

In the years after the United Nations issued a report calling for “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” to address climate change, the Earth began warming at a record pace. Greenhouse gas emissions rebounded sharply following a pandemic-induced slump. Returns on fossil fuels soared to new heights. Why, even amid broad awareness of climate breakdown, is it so difficult to change course? Imagining our way out of ecological crisis requires seeing human systems within the non-human constraints of finite nature. This course philosophically examines the concept of limits, including the social limits imposed through property relations, values, infrastructures, policy and regulations, borders and racism, and uneven exchanges and standards of living, as well as the planetary limits that press urgently upon us: water scarcity, rising sea levels, wet-bulb thresholds, tipping points, extinction cascades, termination shocks, points of no return. How are these different kinds of limits connected? What political fronts and alternative pathways to a just society can arise from the heat of the present? Does global transition demand reform or revolution? To answer these questions, we will examine recent climate science along with texts in ethical and political theory, green planning, ecological economics, and environmental humanities. Issues to be explored include capitalist growth and colonialism, contested narratives of the Anthropocene, energy transitions, eco-apartheid, adaptation, geoengineering, land use, and food systems.

3 credits. Matthew Bower.

HUM-373A1 – Phase Transitions: Simulations and Applications

A course on understanding phase transitions as a broader phenomenon that emerges in the study of social networks, flocking models, polarization, and idealizations of diaspora. In this course, we will take W.E.B. Du Bois' paradigm of a hesitant sociology, where chance human conduct and physical law are no longer seen as contradictory, but founded upon advancements in physics at the turn of the 20th century. Students will study these social mechanics by utilizing tools from statistical mechanics, understanding phase spaces, thermodynamic ensembles, and entropy to serve as models to study diaspora, cultural shifts, political polarity, and to conceive of social movements as complex adaptive physical systems. Students will learn how to produce computer simulations of pertinent social systems. They will incorporate necessary physics to faithfully replicate real world phenomena such as mosh pits, Mexican waves, diasporic social networks, and more.

3 credits. Victor Peterson II & Abhishek Sharma.

HUM-373B2 – Creating Voice in Fiction

This course involves robust reading and close examination of the various literary components that contribute to an author's voice. Students will complete generative creative exercises, write a short story that they submit for workshop, and produce a final portfolio of original fiction. They will leave with a clear understanding of how to intentionally craft their own voice.

Assigned books: *Nine Stories* by J.D. Salinger, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *Cassandra at the Wedding* by Dorothy Baker, *The Road to Los Angeles* by John Fante, and short stories by Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Jamaica Kincaid, Ling Ma, and James Baldwin.

3 credits. Theresa Lin.

Social Sciences

SS-323 – Politics and Collective Memory

The basis of this course is to try to think through collective memory as a project, and a practice. This is to say that we will be investigating how it is that a shared sense of the past is actively produced, and how doing so is considered political from different perspectives. Collective invocations of the past can act as both an inspiration and a model, but also a justification—as historical necessity—for what a present course of action requires by way of sacrifice, terror, and war. But, they can also attune themselves to what historical memory has erased or silenced and be asked to serve a distinctly different purpose. These practices of collective memory, far from creating a unitary narrative of the past to serve the function of justifying (and obscuring the true costs) of actions taken in the present, contend with the fragmentary, disjunctive, and traumatic qualities of the past in ways that refuse resolution and cohesion. As such, they have distinctly different aims and additionally offer a different lens through which we might imagine political activity. These authors, thinkers, poets, filmmakers, and activists don't obscure but rather make visible the contingencies and power dynamics that infuse all processes of collective memory. It is alongside and in conversation with them that we will develop our own practices of collective memory.

3 credits. E Barnick.

SS-335 – Science and Technology in the Long 18th Century (1687-1839)

This course explores science and technology during the so-called long eighteenth century, a period marked by new efforts to render nature and knowledge rational, systematic, and intelligible. Beginning with the Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopédie by d'Alembert and its famous "tree of knowledge," we consider how Enlightenment thinkers sought to organize the sciences and the arts within a unified system of knowledge. Topics include selections from Newton's Principia on the laws of nature; Linnaean systems of classification; astronomical cataloging and the mapping of the heavens in the work of William Herschel; debates about mechanism and life through automata such as Vaucanson's famous duck; and the transformation of natural history into the emerging life sciences.

3 credits. Eduardo Escobar.

SS-345 – Understanding Capitalism: Competition, Conflict, Crises and Change (Raymond Brown Seminar)

In this course we will explore what capitalism is, how (and in what sense) capitalism works, why (and in what sense) it doesn't work, where and when it works, how it changes over time and how our social/policy actions influence and condition its trajectory and very existence. A key point of contention among students of economic history is the tension between: (1) the changing and varied institutions of the capitalist mode of production over time and across geographic space and; (2) the apparent repetitive patterns identified by economic historians, which suggests that there exist 'economic laws of motion' that are, in some sense, independent of particular policy and specific historical-institutional structures. The long-term repetitive patterns we will study include unemployment; persistent poverty and inequality both within and across nations; significant wage differentials by race and gender; cyclical patterns of booms and busts (of varying periodicities)

as well as severe economic crises affecting the global capitalist world every 40-60 years; degradation of the natural environment. To frame the questions, we are compelled to use a multidisciplinary approach, making extensive use of case studies and examples from history, anthropology, and the other behavioral sciences as well as recent developments in economic theory such as "complexity theory" and nonlinear processes. Students will design research projects based on their areas of interest. The general arc of the course will confront the relationship between social/state policies and successful national development policies—which also includes the profound question of the meaning of ‘development’. One fundamental research question might be if the institutions that comprise the ‘Developmental State’ have been instrumental in framing, shaping (and sometimes taming) capitalist development, can social/political forces push the system toward economic transformation and technological change that is more tailored to environmental and social justice?

3 credits. John Sarich.

SS-366 – Migration and Empire

The last two centuries saw human migration at an unprecedented rate. Whether voluntary or forced, this migration changed not just the demographics of places around the world, but also profoundly transformed culture and the economics of labor. This migration took on many forms—from people seeking new work opportunities to those forced to move because of indenture, and from people fleeing wars and persecution to those seeking to reunite with separated families—and remains a contested topic in today’s world. This course will focus on the stories of migration within the British Empire, and the ways in which colonial subjects moved, or were forced to move, to make new lives in places that were completely unfamiliar, except for the overarching context of Empire. We will read about South Asian merchants who moved to East Africa to become critical economic entrepreneurs, about formerly enslaved Africans who were sent to the Caribbean to perform indentured labor, and the migration of the Chinese to Singapore as a replacement for “lazy natives,” among other examples. And we will also focus on the ways in which the British Empire developed new tools and technologies of surveillance and permits—including the visa and the passport as we know it today—to control the movement of colonial subjects.

3 credits. Ninad Pandit.

SS-318A-1 – The Future of Work

In this seminar, we examine the evolving nature of work and how it is being reshaped by technological change, globalization, and new organizational practices. We study the economic and social forces driving transformations in labor demand, job design, wages, and inequality, with particular attention to automation, artificial intelligence, remote and hybrid work, and global production networks. Throughout the course, we survey recent literature in economics and the broader social sciences to understand the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence on the future of work. We also explore how labor market institutions, education systems, demographic change, and the climate transition interact with technological and global forces to shape the behavior of workers and firms.

The course emphasizes the advancement of students’ research skills. Students are expected to learn how to read academic papers, assess empirical strategies, work with data, and formulate their own research questions. By the end of the semester, each student produces an original research project that applies social science methods to a topic related to the future of work.

3 credits. Loujaina Abdelwahed.

SS-318B-1 – Hispanics in the US: An American History

This course provides a historical overview of the political, cultural, social, and economic experiences of Hispanic/Latino communities in the United States. Proposing a “long view” to study the diverse experiences of Hispanic peoples in the US, this course is structured in three units: 1) Colonial Roots and Postcolonial Displacements; 2) Migrations and New Communities; 3) Defining Hispanicity. The first unit examines the culture of Spanish-speaking communities in colonial territories that are now part of the U.S., and how changes in sovereignty during the 19th century made those Hispanics foreigners in their native lands. The second unit analyzes 20th-century Latino migrations to the U.S. and the new communities that have resulted from them. The third unit examines approaches used by census policies to count the Hispanic/Latino demographic and evolving patterns of ethnic and racial self-identification within this population.

3 credits. Emmanuel Velayos Larrabure.

SS-347 – Macroeconomics

Macroeconomics is the study of aggregate output, employment, prices, growth, cycles, and development. We begin by examining the nature and meaning of economic development, the theory of national income accounting and measures of human development. We then proceed to study the history of U.S. macroeconomic performance, with emphasis on the current crisis and its international dimensions. We then turn to competing theories of what drives macroeconomic activity in a capitalist economy. Topics covered include: Theories of economic growth, business cycle models, labor market dynamics, financial markets, foreign exchange rates and the impact of monetary and fiscal policy on the trajectory of the system.

3 credits. Loujaina Abdelwahed.

History and Theory of Art | Core Curriculum

HTA-101 – Modern to Contemporary: An Introduction to Art History

This two-semester art history core course, developed as part of the Foundation year for students in the School of Art but open to all students, is organized around a set of themes running through the history of modernity from the 18th century to the present. Within specific themes, significant works, figures and movements in art/design will be presented chronologically. Students will be able to identify and critically evaluate significant works, figures and movements in art/design in the modern period; be able to describe the main social and political contexts for the changes in art/design over the last two hundred years; and engage, in writing and class discussion, with theoretical perspectives on art/design production. The course will involve museum visits. Grading will be based on class participation, papers, and exams.

3 credits. Lex Lancaster, Jane'a Johnson.

History and Theory of Art | Electives

HTA-299 – Ceramics Within and Beyond Borders

Ceramics, or fired clay, in its intrinsically multifaceted and global nature, resists a straightforward categorization, such as “crafts.” It signifies a medium-defined genre of visual art, that of material culture as well as socio-political practices which have been prized around the world throughout human history. Due to the absence of a core mega-narrative and central theories, investigating ceramics across the globe can be flexible

and exploratory, dealing with various identities and across culturally-connected and disconnected diverse lineages within its world history. This course will experiment with one scenario of the world history of the medium by unpacking ceramics as thing (material, technologies and objects), value (symbols, identities, aesthetics and concepts) and ritual (display, performance, community and daily life) through time and space. The class will proceed in two parts: reviewing selected historical episodes telling stories of contacts and exchanges; and introducing some major critical discourses and issues over the multivalent status of ceramics in relation to modern/contemporary art and society. As a point of entry to history, our global, chronological mapping will start with East Asia, one of the hubs of world ceramic cultures, examining its prehistoric and later enshrinement of the medium, and moving through the Ages of Exploration, Empires and colonial/postcolonial periods in Europe, Africa, Middle East. We will then return to an Asia in contact and conflict with 20th and 21st century Euro-America, where some artists/designers exploring ceramics' new potential as a distinctive material/medium have emerged as cultural celebrities.

2 credits. Yasuko Tsuchikane.

HTA-308 – Women's Art and Feminisms

This course focuses on women and art and intends to propose a reconstruction of some little known but major women's contributions to art, to history, and/or to the women's liberation movements. Organized by medium, as well as chronologically, this course proposes to identify major modes of expressions used by women historically (and until today), and discusses them in their cultural, technological, theoretical, and socio-historical contexts of origin (including feminisms).

The course starts with deconstructing historical representations or misrepresentations of women in visual arts, and discusses them alongside the visibility of art by women artists or lack thereof in history. The recent efforts by the art market and institutions, lately including more women's art in exhibitions and collections, will be discussed and questioned. Because the artworks of individuals who self-identify as women are often found in non-traditional media for the fine arts, our case studies bring us to consider works in the form of public speaking, publishing, poster-making, and other agit-prop such as tee-shirts, buttons, stickers, etc., as well as performance art, public action, and video art. Then, because women artists often worked collectively and collaboratively, a special attention is given to works by collectives such as New York Radical Women, Redstockings, Les Insoumuses, Salsa Soul Sisters, Guerrilla Girls, Grand Fury, WAC, and more recently Black Lives Matter, #MeToo movements internationally.

While learning about women in the visual arts, we will also discuss how their practice engages or not with trends identified as part of the development of feminism. Concepts such as "First Wave," "Second Wave," "Radical Feminism," "Anti-Feminism," "White Feminism," "Black Feminism," "Womanism," "Post-Feminism," and "Neo-Feminism" are also clarified and will allow us to approach the intersectionality of feminisms with race and BIPOC, as well as LGBTQ communities historically. Then the more recent discussions regarding non-binary gender identities are evaluated as a challenge as well as an opportunity for feminism.

2 credits. Stéphanie Jeanjean.

HTA-322 – Global Mediterranean Culture (391 – 1492)

The focus of this course will be the Mediterranean Sea, between the late antique and modern period (ca. 391 and 1492), in a number of its distinctive manifestations, political, religious, social, cultural, and economic. Once upon a time, the Mediterranean Sea was possessively defined as the *mare nostrum* (our sea), and claimed by the Roman

Empire or some other superpower. As a result, the Mediterranean, since then, has been viewed almost exclusively with a Euro centrality, founded on colonialism and exploitation.

Current historiography, the social sciences, has broken away from that single local, and ultimately incomplete narrative for the Mediterranean. The primary goal for this course is to provide a “wider and more humane history” that is more inclusive of “invisible people and cultures” and provides alternate narratives to the ones currently in the history books. The conception of the ‘Great Sea’ as a boundary-less space allows us to address the many lacunae in its history that are now being acknowledged.

2 credits. Kate Minniti.

HTA-324 – Museum as Frame

Through class meetings and museum visits we will investigate the idea of the museum, its history, cultural significance, meaning and societal influence. In particular, we will consider how the museum experience affects the attitudes and assumptions of museum visitors. We will explore the intellectual under-pinnings of the modern museum since the Enlightenment, with special attention to issues of nationalism and eurocentrism; the complexities of museum sponsorship (public, private, and corporate), and how they shape cultural presentation; and the emergence, since the 1960s, of community-oriented museums alongside the growing importance in society of multi-culturalism and ethnic identity. We will also consider standard art-historical issues of style and society as they relate to the various artworks we see.

2 credits. Andrew Weinstein.

HTA-343 – Expanded Curatorial Practice

Since the early 2000s, much critical attention and training have been granted to curation, but what happens after an exhibition goes public? In our course, we will focus on the work that lies between the curatorial act and the public's experiences. To do so, we'll investigate the work of interpretation and mediation—work that takes place in the wake of curatorial decisions and in dialogue with the public.

Throughout the course we will reflect on the idea and act of mediation—alternately defined as intervention, resolution, conveyance, or connecting—as distinct from curation. This work will be supported by readings on aesthetics, exhibition histories, artistic and cultural labor, address and hospitality, accessibility, and art-informed pedagogy.

Adopting the role of aberrant and uninvited public programmers and educators, students will focus on a significant institution in the New York area, researching, composing and designing counter-guides to these spaces and their programming.

2 credits. Robin Simpson.

HTA-351 – Modernism and Intermediality

This course reevaluates the high modernist conventions of "medium specificity" and "autonomy" by resituating modern artists' intermediality as they worked across media and in other disciplines. Taking an intermedial vantage, we will probe the crossing between visual art and dance, performance, theater, music, craft, design, poetry, and publishing. Through case studies, primary sources, and theoretical texts, we will devise alternate vocabularies and frameworks to account for the period against the restrictive ideals of formalist criticism, including its overdetermined relationship with opticality, reason, and objectivity. Problematizing the modernist

project's rhetoric of medium "purity" as vested in paradigms of gender, sexuality, race, labor, class, and nationality, we will assess the affordances of expanded media as counterhegemonic expression. Moreover, we will consider how genre conflation afforded critical expressions of alterity, coded discourse, and critical disaffiliation from normative mores. Centering on artists and movements active in Europe, Central, South, and North America between 1900-1960, we will chart how cross-disciplinary projects structured transnational networks through performance, publications, and exhibition-making. A sampling of figures under study include: Paul Cadmus, Lygia Clark, Joseph Cornell, Martha Graham, Helen Frankenthaler, Lincoln Kirstein, Norman Lewis, Matta, Lee Miller, Carlos Mérida, César Moro, Isamu Noguchi, Alice Rahon, Augusta Savage, among others.

2 credits. Megan Kincaid.

HTA-285A-1 – Single-Work Seminar: Acropolis of Athens

This course surveys one of the most historically, culturally, and religiously significant sanctuaries in ancient Greece, the Acropolis of Athens. This rocky outcrop overlooking the city contained a multitude of natural and anthropic features that marked it as the very center of the religious life of Athens, as well as the perfect stage for political propaganda. We will investigate the long history of the Acropolis from the Bronze Age to contemporary times and explore its political and religious importance not only for the city of Athens, but also for Hellenistic kings, Roman emperors, travelers, and artists. We will also study the different phases of reuse of some of the buildings as churches and mosques and discuss issues of colonization and repatriation of antiquities.

2 credits. Kate Minniti.

HTA-313A-1 – Contemporary Queer and Trans Art Practices

Aligning with the cultural and political aims of queer and trans movements, contemporary queer and trans artists develop particular tactics for subverting heteronormative and cisnormative conventions of making and viewing art. These visual and material strategies certainly assert queer and trans subject positions, but they also shift how art is made and encountered by queering and transing particular formal properties, methods of production, and the contexts and conditions of viewing. While trans is often subsumed under the category of queer when gender and sexuality are at stake, trans imperatives and art practices offer distinct approaches to issues of gender and sexed embodiment--material experiences shaped by systemic racism, colonialism, capitalism, and ableism. These imbricated forces guide our investigation of queer and trans art practices including camp, craft, formalism, failure, public intimacies, archival interventions, environmental entanglements, and more-than-human transformations.

2 credits. Lex Lancaster.

HTA-313B-1 – Art and Dictatorship in South America

This course explores art created across South America during the military dictatorships from the 1960s to the 1980s. We will focus on artists from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru. The course introduces students to the political and social contexts of the period and highlights similarities and differences between the dictatorial regimes in these countries. We will discuss paintings, installations, performances, video art, public art, fashion, and photography, as well as the strategies of production and circulation amid censorship and repression. Throughout the course, we will explore artists' diverse and complex relationships with dictatorships. We will examine works created in support of the regimes, artworks that developed political-partisan responses to the dictatorships, and those offering less explicitly partisan resistance. We will discuss works that incorporate feminist and queer perspectives responding to authoritarianism in ways that have been less recognized and valued. Additionally, we will consider the specific impacts of the dictatorships on Black and Indigenous

movements. Artists and collectives studied include Leticia Parente, CADA, Cildo Meireles, 3Nós3, Diamela Eltit, Graciela Carnevale, Elías Adasme, and Leon Ferrari.

2 credits. Carol Filippini.