

IS THEORY CRITICAL?

May 22-23, 2015

University of California, Irvine

The UCI School of Humanities hosts the first annual UC Irvine Critical Theory Institute conference on the question: “Is Theory Critical?” In anticipation of the 50th anniversary of the seminal Johns Hopkins conference on “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” better known by its published title of *The Structuralist Controversy*, as well as of the 50th anniversary of the founding of UC Irvine as an institution where “critical theory” has been key to the intellectual development and reputation of the campus, we would like to take stock of where theory has been and where it might still go. This is not, however, as so many such occasions have been, simply to celebrate, uncritically as it were, the legacy of theory, which as many have argued has indeed become endemic to virtually all scholarly work undertaken today in the humanities, the arts, and qualitative social sciences. In this regard, the very success of critical theory is the source of its diffusion and disappearance into an increasingly wide array of differing critical practices and “studies.” In full cognizance of this dilemma, we aim, in lieu of a celebratory and inevitably nostalgic gathering for a high theory that is no more, to ask harder and indeed more relentlessly critical questions about critical theory. Hence, our phrasing of the conference agenda in response to the question: is theory critical? By “critical” we understand the adjective both in the sense of whether there is still a “need” for theory in the current historical conjuncture and in the sense of whether theory is or is even able to live up to the claim of engaging in the specific work of critique. Phrased otherwise, *what are the limit conditions for a critical theory in the 21st century?*

LANGSON LIBRARY

9:30 AM | CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST

“Through Discerning Eyes: Origins and Impact of Critical Theory at UCI” exhibit open for viewing with curators in the Muriel Ansley Reynolds Gallery

10:00 AM | RETROSPECTIVE: CRITICAL THEORY AT IRVINE

Welcomes: Lorelei Tanji, Georges Van Den Abbeele, and Michael P. Clark

Introduction to the Critical Theory Archive: John Carlos Rowe and Alexandra Bisio, Processing Archivist for the Critical Theory Archive; Curator for Critical Theory Exhibit

J. Hillis Miller, “The Critical Theory Archives and Institutional Creativity”

11:00 AM | MORPHING MEMORY: THE CRITICAL THEORY ARCHIVE AT UC IRVINE

In the context of institutional creativity and the origins and impact of the programs related to critical theory, what is the future of a critical theory archive, and does it matter? What is it like to use an archive of critical theory, and what might it mean in future scholarship? What does it mean to collect and preserve a critical theory archive today?

Moderator: Matthew Roberts, Research Librarian for English, Comparative Literature, and Critical Theory; Curator for Critical Theory Exhibit

Panelists: J. Hillis Miller, Steve Mailloux, John Rowe, Gabriella Schwab

12:00 - 1:30 PM | LUNCH AND TOUR *Hosted by the UCI Library*

Tour of Critical Theory Archives, Verle and Elizabeth Annis Reading Room and Patio

HUMANITIES GATEWAY 1030

1:30 - 3:30 PM | IS THEORY CRITICAL?

What is the environment for “critical theory” going forward? To what extent can or should such concepts as the Anthropocene, globalization, neocapitalism, or neoliberalism frame current and emerging modes of critical practice?

Moderator: David Theo Goldberg

Panelists: Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Sim, Geoffrey Bennington, Ackbar Abbas, Lillith Mahmud

4:00-6:00 PM | WELLEK LECTURE BY CATHERINE MALABOU

Metamorphoses of Intelligence
Lecture 3 of 3: “Like a Pollock Painting”

6:00 PM | BUFFET DINNER *Hosted by the School of Humanities*

Humanities Gateway 1010 and Courtyard

HUMANITIES GATEWAY 1030

10:00 AM – 11:30 AM | RECOGNIZING CRITIQUE

Is critical theory today a recognizable genre/style of thinking/writing? If so, what are its most salient features? If not, what should count as an instance of “critique”/“theory”/ “theorizing”? Are there other kinds of intervention into the public “space(s) of appearance” that could count as critical and/or theoretical?

Moderator: Horacio Legras

Panelists: Peggy Kamuf, Irving Goh, Xudon Zhang, Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan

11:30 AM – 12:30 PM BUFFET LUNCH *Hosted by School of Humanities*

Humanities Gateway 1010 and Courtyard

12:30-2:00 PM | THE ARTS OF THEORY

Over the past forty years, many performing artists, visual artists and writers claim to have learned from reading critical theory and engaging with its concepts. During this time period what, if anything, have critical theorists learned from the arts? How might renewed or intensified scrutiny of artistic practices constructively inflect emerging and future iterations of critical theory?

Moderator: Virginia Jackson

Panelists: David Palumbo-Liu, Avery Slater, Jacques Lezra, Stephen Barker

2:15-3:45 PM | ON THE USE AND REUSE OF HISTORY: READING HAYDEN WHITE'S THE PRACTICAL PAST

Moderator: Winston James

Panelists: Robert Doran, Lisa Lowe, Edward Dimendberg, Ethan Kleinberg

4:00-5:30 PM | THE FUTURE OF THE “POST-”

Must theory be present- and future-oriented? How does one critically engage earlier versions of “theory” and “critique,” or pre-modern, even pre-theoretical cultures, without falling into the trap of “irrelevance” and antiquarianism? In a word: what kind of resource does the past contain for a critical use of theory today?

Moderator: Jane O. Newman

Panelists: David Simpson, Jonathan Culler, Roland Greene, Eleanor Kaufman