THE AESTHETICS OF PAIN
Semiotics and Affective Comprehension in Music, Literature, and Sensate Experience

This presentation examines the extreme experience of pain in relation to the aesthetic experiences of music, poetry, and discursive prose. It argues that experience in general is conditioned by schemas of experience that direct attention and expectation, and for this reason, while it feels immediate – with the immediacy of experience being its defining quality – nevertheless experience, as such, is mediated. Semiotics – and the human sciences more generally – analyze such mediations. Furthermore, it argues, following the philosopher of music Victor Zuckerkandl and the neuroscientist David Huron, that experience as such cannot be understood as the epiphenomenon of (and thereby reducible to) either physics or psychology: that is, that it cannot be understood solely as a “natural fact” or solely as a “cultural construction.” Here, then, I argue that the very phenomenon of experience itself is a social institution, and that the institutional nature of experience is most readily discernible in aesthetic experiences of art – which the French novelist Stendhal described as “the promise of happiness” – and particularly the art of music insofar as music, in its focus on sense experience, emphasizes what is part of the other arts and everyday experience as well: the temporality of expectation, the future-oriented “promises” that shape experience in general. The extreme experience of pain, I suggest however, erases the promise of experience; it collapses expectation into simple unabating attention. This, I take it, is why Elaine Scarry and others have argued that pain is profoundly antisocial. Thus, the issue I address in this presentation is the manner in which such “unsocial” experience can be taken up by another profoundly social institution, the representations of discursive aesthetics.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Professor Ronald Schleifer

Ronald Schleifer is George Lynn Cross Research Professor of English and Adjunct Professor in Medicine at the University of Oklahoma. He has written or edited more than twenty books, the most recent of which are A Political Economy of Modernism: Literature, Post-Classical Economics, and the Lower Middle Class (Cambridge, 2018); Pain and Suffering (Routledge, 2014; translated into Chinese 2017); The Chief Concern of Medicine: The Integration of the Medical Humanities and Narrative Knowledge into Medical Practices (co-authored with Dr. Jerry Vannatta, Michigan 2013). He has published a number of books focused on what he calls “the cultural of modernism.” These include Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture 1880-1940 (Cambridge, 2000); Modernism and Popular Music (Cambridge 2011); and A Political Economy of Modernism. He is also active in the medical humanities, literary theory, and semiotics. His first book, A. J. Greimas and the Nature of Meaning: Linguistics, Semiotics, and Discourse Theory was republished by Routledge in 2016, thirty years after it first appeared. He has published more than ninety journal articles and chapters. In addition, he is the co-editor of two text anthologies: Contemporary Literature Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies (Longman 1989, 1994, 1998, the last edition of which remains in print); and A Postmodern Bible Reader (Blackwell 2001). He edited Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture for many years, and recently was interim co-editor of Configurations: A Journal of Literature, Science, and Technology. He was also the editor of a book series, The Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory, which published two dozen interdisciplinary books by emerging and established scholars published by the University of Oklahoma Press, 1986–2000. Currently, he is working, with Dr. Jerry Vannatta, on a text-anthology entitled Literature and Medicine. He has lectured and conducted a faculty seminar on “Scholarly Publishing” in many universities throughout the world. http://www.ou.edu/cas/english/about/faculty/r-schleifer

DETAILS

Date: 2 October 2018 (Tue)
Time: 2:00 - 3:30 pm
Venue: The Hive TR+48 (LHS-02-02)
Contact: Graham Matthews gmatthews@ntu.edu.sg Ivy Yeh hyyeh@ntu.edu.sg
Register: https://tinyurl.com/2018-MH5

This event is organised by the Medical Humanities research cluster at the School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University. For more information, please email soh_comms@ntu.edu.sg