INSTRUCTOR: Prof. Laurence de Looze

COURSE TITLE: Why (and how) are things similar?: Analogy, Example, Metaphor, Taxonomy

(What ties together the four words at the head of this course’s title is that they all have something to do with similarity. As a result, to understand the title of this course – to perceive, in other words, that similarity is the similar feature running through all four words – is already to enter into the course content. How does one know that, despite the many differences among phenomena, one is supposed to look for and extrapolate a feature of similarity? And how does it happen that most people who encounter this course title will extract the very same similarity – that is, the similarity of similarity?)

This course will ask two deceptively simple questions: How do we know when (or that) things are similar, and what is the relation between our perceptions of similarity and our notions of “reality” and/or “meaning”? Our time will be spent in examining the difficulties that arise in trying to formulate acceptable answers to these questions.

For the last few decades, theoreticians and critics have been greatly concerned with questions of difference/ différance. This course, however, is much more than a reversal of the difference/similarity equation. It may indeed be true that everything is different from everything else, as has been often put forward, but all human beings live as though this were not the case. Why do people perceive or create similarities, and on what basis (and by means of what strategies) do they establish resemblances? Moreover, what does it mean to say that everything is different from everything else except to imply that at a second level the trait of difference itself becomes the similar feature all phenomena have in common? What, then, does it mean to discover (or construct) similarities? Why do we construct or perceive resemblances? And what does it tell us when we find them meaningful (or not meaningful)?

I propose to look at considerations of what constitutes resemblance and what resemblance means drawn from a wide variety of disciplines and orientations: philosophical writings, literary works, clinical psychology, art history, literary theory, artificial intelligence, etc. Is the ability to construct analogies – which means to perceive similarities – at the very base of what we call human knowledge, as recent studies by clinical psychologists suggest? How do we decide which similarities matter to us, or whether an analogy has “meaning” or not? And what of metaphor which, since Aristotle, has been seen as special kind of analogy? Do any/all/some metaphors actually produce knowledge (Hartman’s “cognitive metaphor”; Ricoeur’s “semantic collision”)? By contrast, what makes some metaphors “dead”? Is all perception of reality fundamentally “metaphorical,” as Nietzsche maintained? Finally, is what we call “analysis” ever anything more than analogical or allegorical discourse, as Northrup Frye suggested?

Core Readings (provisionary list):


Davis, Steven, ed. Pragmatics: A Reader. (Selections)
De Man, “Metaphor”, in Allegories of Reading, 134-59.


— Gödel, Escher, Bach. (Selections)


Montaigne, Michel de. *Essays* (selections – especially the first ones of Book I, “De l’Institution des Enfants” and “De l’Experience”)


Additional readings (recommended readings that will form the basis for seminar reports and a short position paper; these also comprise suggestions for works in which one might wish to study resemblance/similarity):

Aristotle. *Poetics*. (Selections)

Bible: The New Testament (Selections)

Borges, Jorge Luis. (Selected Fictions)

Dali, Salvador. (Selected Visual Works)

Diderot, Denis, and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert. *Encyclopédie* (Selections)

Juan Manuel. *El Conde Lucanor* (Part I)

La Fontaine, Jean de *Fables* (Selections)

Neruda, Pablo. (Selected Poems)