# <u>The Art of Self-Portraits</u>

Winter 2022
Instructor: Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti
Pronouns: She, her, hers
Room: TBD
Day and Time: Wed-Fri 9.45am-11.15am
Office Hours: On zoom by appointment

## <u>Course Description</u>

What is a self-portrait? The simple answer is that it is a portrait of the self. The complex answer is: anything that a person finds relevant to one's identity. Sometimes self-portraits are built around a positive idea, sometimes around a sense of loss; sometimes they are constructed as a shield or as a weapon, and turn into a manifesto of the self; sometimes they include a physical representation, sometimes they deny legitimacy to the body; sometimes gender or race (or both) are at the core of the identity, sometimes they are hidden; they are, however, never neutral and are always meaningful. In this class we will learn how to disentangle these multiple layers and will work on deconstructing them: we will focus on how each facet shapes and determines the representation and will appreciate the tactics and strategies used by the artists and authors in our syllabus. The class is taught in English and will have creative as well as critical assignments.

The syllabus is marginally flexible: while we need to consider specific texts for they express certain modes of self-representation, I am open to add, remove, modify the material to fit your interests as long as we respect the main tenets of 'The Art of Self-Portraits': examining a support the author designed explicitly as a self-representation. Further critical readings will be assigned at the beginning of the quarter if you wish to read more on one specific subject.

## <u>Calendar</u>

**<u>Week 1: Introduction: Identity, Gender and Portraits</u>**

**Section 1** Class Presentation: Portraits and Self-Portraits

**Section 2** Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), *Self-Portraits* (series)

　　　　　Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), *Self-Portraits* (series)

**<u>Week 2: At the Roots of Identity</u>**

**Section 1** Claude Steele (1946-), *Whistling Vivaldi* (2010) [Selections]

**Section 2** James McBride (1954-), *The Color of Water* (1995) [Selections]

**<u>Week 3: Being VS Appearance</u>**

**Section 1** Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), 'Appearance', *The Life of the Mind* (1977)

　　　　　Naomi Wolf (1962-), *The Beauty Myth* (1990) [Selections]

**Section 2** Jung Chang (1952-), *Wild Swans* [Selections]

　　　　　Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-), *Americanah* (2013) [Selections]

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**Week 4: A Fictional Portrait**

**Section 1** Marguerite Duras (1914-1996), *The Lover* (1984) [Selections]

**Section 2** Michel Houellebecq (1956-), *The Map and the Territory* (2010) [Selections] OR

      Guillaume Nicloux (1966-), *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq* (2014)

**Week 5: Portrait of the Artist as an Aging Self**

**Section 1** Karl Ove Knausgaard (1968-), *My struggle* (2013) [Selections]

**Section 2** Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), *The Coming of Age* (1970) [Selections]

**Week 6: The Art of Mystification**

**Section 1** Romain Gary (1914-1980), *Hocus Bogus* (1976) [Selections]

      Romain Gary (1914-1980), *Promise at Dawn: A Memoir* (1961) [Selections]

**Section 2** James Frey (1969-), *A Million little pieces* (2003) [Selections]

**Week 7: Portraits in Translation and in Displacement**

**Section 1** Eva Hoffmann (1945-), *Lost in translation : Life in a New Language* (1989) [Selections]

      Jhumpa Lahiri (1967), *In Other Words* (2017) [Selections]

**Section 2** Edward Said (1935-2003), *Out of Place* (1999) [Selections]

**Week 8: Self-Portraits in Comics**

**Section 1** Marjane Satrapi (1969-), *Persepolis* (2003) comicbook OR *Persepolis* (2008), motion picture

**Section 2** Alison Bechdel (1960-), *Fun home: family tragicomic* (2006) [Selections]

      Janine Utell 'Serializing the Self in the Space between Life and Art' (2020)

**Week 9: An Educated Portrait**

**Section 1** Tara Westover (1986-), *Educated* (2018) [Selections]

**Section 2** Toni Morrison (1931-2019), *The Pieces I Am* (2019)

**Week 10: Poster & Video Presentations**

**Section 1** Poster & Video Presentations

**Section 2** Movie

## Course Objectives and Learning Goals

By the end of this course, you will:

-learn to identify the act of self-representation and its features in different media (text, painting, cartoon, cinematic);

-learn to analyse both fictional and critical texts in their social and historical contexts;

-become more comfortable using the vocabulary pertaining gender, identity and intersectionality on the one hand, and of literary analysis on the other hand;

-learn to research a social and historical phenomenon, using a variety of resources from different fields;

-learn to use a creative approach to tackle academic questions;

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## Credits, Assignments and Grades

You may take the credit for 3, 4 or 5 units, letter grade or credit/no credit. Please note that the credit/no credit option requires per university policy a grade of "C-" or above to pass.

**Preparation and Participation** both are essential parts of the class. They entail you arriving on time in class, having read the material beforehand, being present and attentive, participating respectfully in the discussion, submitting the assignments on time. All of the above contribute to thriving and enriching discussions, and ultimately foster a sense of community in the class.

**Journaling:** You will write journal entries to reflect on the question of self-representation, on what you are learning, what surprised you in the readings. Each journal entry should be of about 2-300 words (it is more about reflecting with your reading than a writing assignment). The shared nature of the journal entry (it will be on a google folder) will help class preparation and discussion.

**Assignments I and II:** You may choose a **creative** or **critical** option, both need to be 2/3 pages long.
   **Academic:**
   1) Search for a self-portrait. You can consider painters, writers, bloggers, celebrities, politicians,etc.
   2) Analyse the self-portrait using the tools learnt in class. Consider what is present, absent, highlighted, hidden, forgotten, etc. and offer your interpretation for its underlying logic and structure.
   **Creative:**
   1) Look for a fictional character (novel character, movie character, cartoon character, etc.). The only requirement is that I need to be familiar with it (sorry, but otherwise I won't be able to grade you), therefore you need to confirm with me the subject.
   2) Identify with this character and try to write their self-portrait as if they were the ones writing it. You need to respect their core identity, gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, political views, social/economic status, perspectives on life, linguistic expression, etc.
   3) To this fictional self-portrait you will add a paragraph detailing and explaining your strategies and the logic underlying them.

**Assignment III** You may choose a **creative** or **academic** option, both need to be 5/6 pages long.
   **Academic:**
   1) Pick one of the works assigned in class and read (watch) the whole text (support).
   2) Consider the relations (or lack thereof) of the self-portrait with the rest of the text. Here are some questions you can use to guide your analysis: To the best of your knowledge, is the self-portrait truthful? Is the self-portrait undermining/contradicting the values of the text? Are there other portraits and do they differ from the self-portrait?
   **Creative:**
   1) Pick a self-representational approach among the ones encountered in class.
   2) Write your self-portrait using that approach (two pages // or you can pick a visual medium)

3) You will need to add: a comparison/reflection with/about the self-portrait whose style you are imitating (at least one page) and a paragraph detailing and explaining your strategies and the logic underlying them (one to two pages).

**Poster Presentation**: In groups of 2, you will pick an author, an artist, a blogger, a director, etc. famous or infamous for their self-portraits and will present, analyse and dissect their work using the tools learnt in class. If you have trouble finding subjects, consult with me.

| 3 units | 4 units | 5 units |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Participation & Attendance 30% | Participation & Attendance 30% | Participation & Attendance 30% |
| Journaling 10% | Journaling 10% | Journaling 10% |
| Assignment I/II or III 30% | Assignment I or II 20% | Assignment I 15% |
| Poster Presentation 30% | Assignment III 20% | Assignment II 15% |
| | Poster Presentation 20% | Assignment III 15% |
| | | Poster Presentation 15% |
| Total: 100% | Total 100% | Total 100% |

**Late Submissions Policy**

All assignment due dates will be posted on Canvas to help you plan. If you take the class for 3 or 4 units, you may choose which assignments to submit (respecting, however their due date).

If, for whatever reasons, you are having difficulties in submitting the assignments on time, you have up to one week (=7 days) of delay allowed, distributable throughout the assignments, i.e. you wouldn't be penalized if you submitted one of the assignments one day late, or three assignments two days late. After that bonus week, your grade will be affected in this manner:

-1 day late: -25% of the total grade;

-2 days late: -50% of the total grade;

-3+ days late: -75% of the total grade;

**Affordability, Sensibility and Inclusion**

Since I believe in the importance of free education, I am committed to making this class financially accessible to all students, therefore: **all of the material for the class will be available on Canvas, you are not expected to buy anything.**

The works we are reading are almost all of autobiographical works. Being narrations of real-life experiences, some of them may (but not necessarily) trigger uncomfortable and/or disturbing thoughts. I will not warn students about particular topics, because sensitivity to different topics varies from person to person, and because topics may arise unexpectedly in class discussion.  If you anticipate or experience acute

distress as a result of encountering a particular topic, please talk to me so I can arrange an alternate assignment. As you may know, there is a difference between feeling personal distress and feeling uncomfortable. Feeling uncomfortable (and sometimes even angry or offended) is part of intellectual growth. Feeling distress is not. I encourage you to take care of yourselves and each other, and to let me know how we can help, within the scope of my role as educator.

Given the fact that we will discuss sensitive issues, such as ideas and concepts about identity, gender, race, ethnicity, it is imperative that there be an atmosphere of trust and safety in the classroom. We will work on fostering an environment in which everyone feels safe to speak and is open to listening to what the other has to say. The act of self-representation is an act which exposes the core of the identity and thus renders the person vulnerable to attack. However, this act of acknowledging one's own essence is also a profoundly empowering moment and that's why we will be working on it