UCG Humanities Program

Reflecting on Culture: An Interdisciplinary Humanities Program

The Humanities Program offers broad, yet intensive interdisciplinary perspectives on contemporary culture. Combining theory, philosophy, history, and criticism, it serves both Humanities-majors and students that opt for other majors the opportunity to experience the great value of a Humanities-perspective in complex interdisciplinary contexts.

The total program consists of a maximum of 80 EC to allow Humanities-students to combine it with a pre-master courses in one of the three Humanities-faculties (Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Arts).

1st year:

- Humanities I (5 EC). Introduction to Linguistics
- Humanities II (5 EC). Seeing Society: imagining the other and otherness in the arts
- Humanities III (5 EC). Philosophy of happiness, death, mind, and the free will
- Humanities IV (5 EC). History of medicine (the body; health and illness) from classical antiquity to the present

2nd and 3rd year:

1. Reliability, uncertainty and trust (7.5) The course deals with a selection of basic questions in epistemology, the philosophical study of knowledge. Examples of such questions include: in what sense are we responsible for what we believe? On what basis do we trust what others tell us, or what scientific theories tell us? How do we deal with uncertainty and fallibility? When is skepticism ‘healthy’? How can we monitor the reliability of our own belief-forming processes, both individually and as a society? Students will be encouraged to think critically about contemporary discussions of these issues in the philosophical literature and to reflect on their significance for society.

2. “Knowledge is Power” (7.5 EC) A course on the relation between rational thinking, information, and democracy. Taking our point of departure in history (the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment), we trace the parallel and intertwine paths of information-media and democracy. We discuss the Dewey-Lippmann debate on the best form of democracy: well-informed elites versus well-educated masses. We then proceed to discuss the ways in which news media and information function in contemporary societies, with a special focus on the role of the arts and entertainment as new sources of information (TV-shows, festivals, animations, TED-Talks, etc.)

3. Tolerating Difference in Europe: Christians, Jews, and Muslims (7.5) The problem that drives this course is the tension in Europe, which resurfaces perennially in different guises, between universal-international values and what might be called the persistent particular—member-state interests in tension with “ever closer union,” national in contrast to European identity, conflicts between national and supranational legal traditions, between public sentiment in one state and largely shared views in the rest of Europe, between business interests and against EU regulation. This module takes up one important and recurring source of tension, at the interface between ‘politics’ and ‘religion’—with due regard for the complexity of each category. We explore in particular the relations between
a still largely Christian Europe and minorities of the other two monotheistic faiths, Judaism and Islam, as these have been part of Europe’s evolving politics and ideologies since the eighteenth century.

4. **Stories that Shape the World** (7.5 EC) Stories are ubiquitous: in art, but also in politics, in science, in education, in the news, and in publicity. They appear in myriad forms: as literature, in films and comics, in songs, as well as in games. But what is a story? Which forms of narrative can we distinguish? And how do narratives shape our culture and our lives, e.g. narratives of illness? How do they express and transmit shared values? We will discuss several narrative genres, from fairytales and myths to short stories and novels, focusing on the functioning of narratives in culture.

5. **Reflecting on Modernity** (7.5; from 2017-2018) Since the Enlightenment, we live in a Modern World. But how did modern thinking shape our culture? What makes us modern? What did modernity bring us, and what were its drawbacks? On the basis of a thorough historical analysis, we will reflect upon the actual state of modern thinking, and on the attempts to transcend it – in ‘meta-modernity’ or ‘reflexive / reflective modernity’. We will use a variety of sources, ranging from philosophical treatises to novels, music, and films.

6. **Science at work** (7.5 EC; from 2017-2018) In this course in Scientific Humanities we investigate science as a cultural / social phenomenon – as a social and individual practice that involves creativity, but also values, power-relations, interests. There seems to be a wide gap between the (self-)image science likes to present to the and the historical practice of scientists ‘on the ground’. A possible point of reference could be the ground-breaking work in Scientific Humanities of Bruno Latour in which anthropology; sociology, economics, and psychology, hermeneutics, and rhetoric join forces in an analysis of science as a truth-seeking endeavor.

7. **How art makes the world** (7.5 EC; from 2017-2018) How does art contribute to our (self-)understanding and identity? In this course on the history of the arts in culture, we focus on art as the imaginative representation of personal and collective consciousness. In contemporary culture, the dimension of imaginative reflection tends to become incorporated and mixed with other dimensions of culture, such as scientific research, publicity, design, and political activism. Direct contact with artists (through our collaboration with the Art Schools in Groningen) is an important asset of this course.

8. **Choice** (7.5; from 2017-2018) This course explores the concept of choice from a variety of perspectives. We would first engage with the basic philosophical discussion of free will and determinism, and move into a more general discussion of the nature of constraints on our choices. Topics would include:

- In what ways are we ‘determined’ by our genetic make-up?
- How do social institutions constrain our choice-making?
- How can we design choice architectures which allow people optimal freedom at the same time as relieving them on excessive demands on their cognitive resources?
- How do we make rational choices? (this part of the course would cover basic concepts of decision theory and discussion of how psychologically realistic its assumptions are).

**Notice:** Courses 1 to 4 will be offered in 2016-2017; courses 1 to 8 will be offered in 2017-2018.