

National Taiwan University
Graduate Institute of Foreign Languages and Literatures
2019 PhD Program Admissions Examination
Subject: Literary Theory and Criticism

Choose any two from the following three questions, and write a well-argued essay for each. Please note that you have to engage with specific theorists and their concepts, instead of just providing general statements and observations.

1. The “subject” has been an intensely and ambivalently contested concept and entity in the history of contemporary literary theory, at least since structuralism up to the present. In various strands of structuralism, such as linguistic, psychoanalytic, Marxist, etc., the subject tends to be regarded as illusory, imaginary, humanist, bourgeois, or just constructed. In the case of psychoanalysis, though it claims for the necessary existence of the subject as void, this claim still implies the voiding and thus desubstantialization of the traditional subject, be it Cartesian cogito or the ego. And when poststructuralism and its affiliated critical discourses, which can include theoretical feminisms, gender studies, postcolonialism, etc., appear to generally deconstruct and subvert the subject, they nonetheless find it necessary to highlight the “agency” if resistance or practice is to be formulated. When it comes to recent “object”/“thing” theories and new materialism, these emergent discourses also largely argue for a “subjectless” world. However, some sort of subject seems to persist still, for they turn to alternative concepts, such as “Actor Network Theory” or others, in order to tackle and explain actions. For this question, please, on the one hand, describe and expound on the vicissitudes of the subject in the said history of contemporary literary theory, and, on the other, provide your commentaries on this history in a sophisticated way.

2. Modern history and societies are very much defined, determined, and (re)structured by the invention and functioning of new expressive or communicative mediums. The humanistic disciplines have long been concerned with language and writing as the principal mediums that account for the establishment, transmission, and renovation of humane or cultural traditions. In recent decades, the medium of writing is even closely related to subversion and resistance; we need just to recall the French word for writing, “*écriture*,” to perceive the involved significance and relevance to contemporary literary theory as well as literary studies. The subversive potentialities seem to pass down to the new emergent technological mediums which not few theorists and critics hold to

challenge the established social or cultural dominant order. For example, Walter Benjamin has pioneered new media studies by formulating the political potentialities which the reproductive technological mediums, such as cinema and photography, carry and can effectuate. Later theorists of information or mnemonic technologies continue to address the said potentialities of the new mediums, though not without calling attention to the changing mode of domination these new technologies are bringing about. For this question, please provide a genealogical or, at least, a combined discussion of medium theories in modern or contemporary literary theory. Some suggested theorists for you to engage with in your essay include, but are not limited to, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida and related poststructuralists, Jacques Rancière, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Bernard Stiegler, Alexander R. Galloway, and Ian Bogost. You need just to cover some but not all of them, but you are expected to derive some theoretical conclusions or thoughts about the medium, for example, what issues theories about the medium should be concerned with. Please note that the point of this question is not for you to center on technology, but rather on the medium with its related meanings which can include the middle, extension, prosthesis, means of expression, substance for growth or transmission, etc.

3. “Life” is one of the most significant, prevalent, and formulated concepts in contemporary literary theory. Poststructuralism, especially the deconstruction-bent version, is generally known to uphold “death” and opposes textuality or writing to the biographical and the organic. However, this deconstructive linguistic take on life does not exhaust its complexity and potentialities, which some prominent lines of theory seek to address and explicate. One line engendered by Michel Foucault’s discourse on biopolitics and neoliberalism leads from Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Judith Butler, etc., up to various theorizations of “bare life” in the technological, political, and globalizing institutions or regimes. On the second, more recently, posthumanist theories, animal studies, and ecological theories have to a greater extent than ever unsettled traditional definitions of life and pushed it to verge on information and nonhuman objects and species. The third line of theory can be attributed to Gilles Deleuze who, among all theorists, might have produced the most extended and thorough elaborations of life and readily designates his own thought as a philosophy of life. For this question, please make a comparison between any two lines of theory mentioned above to expound on how the theories/theorists manage or fail, even though comparatively, to respond to the new challenges or exigencies of our contemporary age.