This course is intended as an introduction to the general problem of historical consciousness. How has the past been conceived in different times and places? How has knowledge of the past been sought, expressed, and conveyed? How does the past remain “present” — practically, politically, psychologically? What are the implications (existential, ethical, epistemic) of our being historical creatures? By means of readings in disciplinary history, creative literature, and philosophy, and through select encounters with works of visual art, poetry, and film, this class will investigate the history (and diversity) of historical reflection. We will pursue our investigation on two simultaneous “tracks” running in parallel (though cross-circuits are expected). One line across the semester will be a series of sequential readings focused on the “classic” history of modern (largely European) historiography and philosophy of history from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century (e.g., Hegel, Ranke, Marx, Burkhardt, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer). Following one of the very greatest scholars of this subject, Hayden White (1928-2018), and his controversial and demanding Metahistory (1972), we will be especially concerned with the relationship between historical writing and the literary imagination (and we will read several works of historically preoccupied fiction along the way). In what ways is historical study “scientific”? In what ways is it an “art”? On the second “track,” and in conjunction with our core historiographical trajectory, we will weekly, generally on Wednesdays, concern ourselves with a series of specific (often contemporary and sometimes experimental) efforts to activate and/or engage the past. It is to be hoped that these case-studies will resonate with our efforts to understand the evolution of modern historical study.

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Class 1: INTRODUCTORY SESSION (no pre-meeting assignment)

Class 2: History, Writing, Time


Lynn Hunt, Measuring Time, Making History (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), Chapter 1, “Is Time Historical?” Online: https://books.openedition.org/ceup/810

W.G. Sebald, Vertigo (New York: New Directions, 1999), Chapter 1, “Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet.”
Class 3: Chronology, Narrative, and the Uncanny

WATCH: *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) circa 90 minutes. Online:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6-K-arV1-U

Class 4: Imagination, Irony, Metaphor

Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Chapter 1, “The Historical Imagination between Metaphor and Irony.”
W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, pp. 33-112 (the first part of Chapter 2, “All’estero”).

Class 5: Presence, Absence, Place


Class 6: The World Spirit Achieving Itself

W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, pp. 112-167 (the second part of Chapter 2, “All’estero,” and Chapter 3, “Dr. K Takes the Waters at Riva”).

Class 7: Loss and Restoration (Lacunae)

WATCH: Julian Baumgartner, “Restauration of Ave Maria” (2014), 11 minutes. Please watch twice, first time the ASMR version; then the narrated one. Online:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNwpINkSTVY&t=3s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5G1C3aBY62E&t=3s

First project-piece due (Bring to class seven, ready to show/discuss): “inpainting exercise”: working with gaps.

Class 8: Faithfulness to the Past (and its People)


Class 9: Searching for Remains (Picking up the Pieces)

Class 10: Renaissance, Tradition, Novelty

Ali Smith, *How to be Both* (New York: Anchor, 2015), first 79 pages. NB: editions of this book can differ in the ordering of the story elements (this is an intentional feature of the work); I am not sure we will all end up with the same version, which could be interesting — or annoying? :)  

Class 11: Anachronics and Archives


Second project-piece due (Bring to class eleven, ready to show/discuss): “anachronic archive” exercise.

PROVISIONAL (subject to change)

Class 12: The Unfolding of What Must Occur (Revolution!)

Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Chapters 7 & 8, “Historical Consciousness and the Rebirth of Philosophical History” & “Marx.”
Ali Smith, *How to be Both*, the next 79 pages.

Class 13: Satura, Melancholy, Punctum (Photography & Death)


Class 14: The Unhistorical (and the Superhistorical)

Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Chapter 9, “Nietzsche.”
Ali Smith, *How to be Both*, the next 79 pages.

Class 15: Reenactment, Return, Performance (Guilt)

Class 16: Anti-Irony, Aesthetics, Endings
Hayden White, *Metahistory*. Chapter 10, “Croce,” and “Conclusion.”
Ali Smith, *How to be Both*, the last 79 pages.

Class 17: Metafiction, Parafiction, Fabulation
CONSIDER: Ayana V. Jackson’s current exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art, “FROM THE DEEP”:
www.si.edu/exhibitions/deep-wake-drexciya-ayana-v-jackson%3Aevent-exhib-6673

Class 18: The Critique of Historical Reason

Class 19: Monuments and Museums (and Forgetting)

Third project-piece due (Bring to class nineteen, ready to show/discuss): “monument proposal” exercise.

Class 20: Being in Time (History and Phenomenology)
Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985 [1925]). We will read a short excerpt from the end of this difficult text, from “Care and Discoveredness,” ff (pp. 297-320).
THANKSGIVING BREAK

Class 21: Memory, Trauma, Witness


WATCH: Jan Karski testimonial in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), circa 10 minutes:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpg-wFJFzRQ

WATCH: Yehiel De-Nur testifying at the Eichmann Trial (1961), watch up to about minute 11:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3-tXyYhdSU

WATCH: “This Is Your Life, Hanna Kohner” (1953), circa 25 minutes:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4ckFEen5Bo

Class 22: Historicity as a Hermeneutic Principle (Gadamer I)


Class 23: Historically Effected Consciousness (Gadamer I)


Class 24: The Angel of History


WATCH: Damon Pham, “Promise Burden Prompt Origin Defense Palette Call” (2022), circa 30 mins:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTMu5P8L8oM&t=81s

PROVISIONAL (subject to change)