Description:

The concept of “genius” celebrates originality and the advancement of ideas across the arts and sciences (there’s even a grant for it), but it has also been associated with inaccessible material, personal suffering, and perceptions of an unstable mind. This seminar explores genius as a cultural category used to understand knowledge production and artistic achievement from the romantic period to the present. Engaging with a wide range of texts from a variety of genres—philosophical treatises, artists’ notebooks, essays by and about scientists, plays, poems, musical recordings, and more—we’ll trace the ways genius transforms from a category mediating between earthly and spiritual realms into one that celebrates intellectual and creative labor while simultaneously rendering it rare and precarious. Questions we’ll take up together include: How did “genius” become associated with individual creators in the first place? What is the relationship of genius to intelligence, talent, labor, and perseverance? How have the arts and sciences historically been mutually constituted—and unconstituted—through the understanding of genius? Does genius have a gender? A genre? Is it ordinary or exceptional? To what extent is genius a useful means of approaching the work of marginalized individuals and communities? What stories do we tell about genius, and why is the narrative of the tragic genius, in particular, so persistent? And what is our role, as consumers of the work of so-called geniuses? Is the concept liberatory, or one that we should aspire to be liberated from? On who, or what, does genius depend?

The works and minds you are likely to encounter in this seminar belong to Immanuel Kant, William Blake, the New York Times “Overlooked” series of obituaries, Stephen Hawking, Patti Smith, Beyoncé, Leonard DaVinci, Hannah Gadsby, Yayoi Kusama, a young savant named Christopher, the recipients of the MacArthur Fellowship, and more. You’ll complete two analytic writing assignments, as well as a research-based reflective assignment that can be approached through different mediums, according to your personal interests. You’ll also be asked to debate your ideas about genius with other seminar participants in class over the course of the semester, ensuring that our work continually reshapes the very concept it seeks to understand.

Learning Outcomes:

- To understand the historical origins and semantic evolution of a socially impactful concept
- To apply that concept to a variety of textual forms (written, visual, and auditory)
- To develop habits of discussion and inquiry as part of a discourse community
- To practice critical thinking through workshopping, writing, and refining ideas
- To engage in research practices that make use of a variety of resources (databases, archives, etc.)
- To cultivate creative approaches to intellectual problems
Assessment:

**Essay #1:** For the first essay, due in class during week 5 of the course, you will put two of our readings in conversation. You’ll write an essay that analyzes one text according to the understanding of genius put forth in another. You may include one outside text of your choice, but this is optional. Textual pairings will be suggested, and you’ll confirm your plans with me prior to getting started. Length: 4-5 pages.

**Essay #2:** For the second essay, due in draft form during Week 9 and in final form during Week 11, you’ll write an essay that expands upon a topic or text we’ve discussed with secondary research. You’ll be encouraged to make use of Special Collections at Bobst. Length: 7-10 pages.

**Discussion Questions:** Each week, 1-2 members of the seminar will contribute questions for discussion based on assigned readings. These questions should be shared with the group no later than the morning of class. I’ll provide a handout on what makes a good question: while such questions can emerge from your attitudes towards and experiences of the readings, they should ultimately offer some type of puzzle for us to consider as a group.

**Notebook:** At the beginning of the term, you should purchase a small notebook in which you’ll record your insights about the material for our course (Muji on Cooper Square and McNally Jackson on Prince St./8th St. are good sources for such books). Even if you take notes on your laptop, you should have this physical book with you during class and ideally, beside you as you prepare for our sessions. We’ll sometimes be looking at sketchbooks, manuscripts, and notebooks; your notebook will constitute your own experiment in these genres. You should plan to fill between 20 and 30 pages of the notebook, depending on its size, with any form of response that is suitable (this should be doable if you fill a page in the book once on your own and once during class each week). Perhaps you’ll make drawings, transcribe portions of text, or take notes on your surroundings at various moments during the week. Anything is possible as long as you are consistent. You’ll share your notebook with me when we meet to discuss your final project.

**Final Project:** Final research-based project accompanied by 3-5 pages of writing. You’ll consult with me to determine the form of the non-written portion of the project, which will be developed in accordance with your abilities, interests, and inclinations. The project’s objective will be to illustrate the concept of genius as you understand it, and to make a case for/against the term’s use. You are encouraged not to write a standard essay for this project: instead you’ll create a visual, auditory, and/or multi-modal response to a text we’ve studied, a topic we’ve debated, or the work of a specific thinker or creator who is not featured on the syllabus. The written portion, for which I’ll provide guidelines, will serve as your statement of purpose, and should include a bibliography. Start thinking early!

**Participation:** A successful seminar depends upon the contributions of its participants. A strong participation grade is earned through consistent attendance, attentive preparation of readings and notes, respectful interaction with fellow members of the class, and regular contributions to group discussion.
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<td>Essay #1</td>
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<td>Essay #2</td>
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**Weekly Schedule of Readings:**

There will be approximately 50-100 pages of reading per week. When there is less reading, it’s either dense, or we’ll have a greater number of texts to discuss. On days where many texts are assigned, I’ll let you know which ones to prioritize; I may also adjust certain readings according to participant interest. Most classes will contain a combination of written, visual, and auditory materials.

All readings—including online content—will either be accessible through our course site, the Bobst Library website, or Course Reserves. A list of books for optional purchase will be sent to you prior to our first meeting. Hannah Gadsby’s Nanette is available through Netflix; if you are not already a Netflix subscriber, you will be advised to sign up for a free trial (which you can then cancel) as we approach Week 5 of the course.

**Week 1  The Genesis of Genius**
- OED entries (in-class handout)
- Plato, Ion (12 pages)
- Immanuel Kant, excerpt from Critique of Judgment (10 pages)
- Arthur Schopenhauer, The World As Will and Representation excerpt (3-5 pages)
- Derrida, The Secrets of the Archive excerpt (5 pages)
- Robinson, Genius: A Very Short Introduction (15 page excerpt)

**Week 2  Tragic Genius**
- The Myth of Daedalus and Icarus (2 pages)
- Goethe, Faust Pt. I (approx. 100 pages)
- Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale” “To Chatterton” (4 pages)
- Shelley, “Adonais” (16 pages) (Optional: Coleridge, “Monody on the Death of Chatterton”)
- Viewing: Joshua Reynolds, Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse; Henry Wallis, The Death of Chatterton; Joseph Severn, John Keats; Sara Bernhardt cartoons and portraits; Harry Clarke, illustrations to Faust
Week 3  Genius and Influence

- Harold Bloom, excerpt from *Genius* introduction; excerpt from *The Anxiety of Influence* (approx. 10 pages)
- William Hazlitt, “Whether Genius is Conscious of Its Powers” (14 pages); “Why the Arts are Not Progressive” (5 pages); “My First Acquaintance with Poets” excerpt (5 pages)
- *Paris Review* “Art of Fiction” interviews with James Baldwin and others (approx. 10 pages)
- Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* excerpts (approx. 10 pages)
- Patti Smith, *Just Kids/M Train* excerpts (approx. 30 pages)
- Viewing: Paintings by Pre-Raphaelite women

Week 4  Canonization and Canonicity

- T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (6 pages)
- Suzan Lori-Parks, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (6 pages)
- Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* excerpts (5 pages)
- Linda Nochlin, “Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists” (25 pages)
- Virginia Woolf, “Shakespeare’s Sister” (Ch 3: *A Room of One’s Own*) (22 pages)
- Charlotte Brontë, “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” (approx 4 pages)
- *New York Times* Obituaries: “Overlooked” (approx. 5 pages)
- Viewing: Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*

Week 5  The Gender of Genius

- Julia Kristeva, “Is There a Feminine Genius?” (10 pages)
- Fragments of Sappho (handout)
- Poetry cluster: Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Claudia Rankine, etc. (5 pages)
- Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (6 pages)
- Excerpts from Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius* (approx. 30 pages)
- Screening: Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette* (Watch via Netflix before class)
- Viewing: Portraits of Gertrude Stein

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Essay #1 Due

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Week 6  Scientific Genius (50 pages)

- Samuel Smiles, “Scientific Pursuits” excerpt from *Self-Help* (approx 10 pages)
- Foucault, “What Is An Author?” (15 pages)
- Roland Barthes, “Einstein’s Brain” (3 pages)
- Essay(s) TBD from Stephen Hawking’s *Black Holes and Baby Universes* (20 pages)
- *The Atlantic*, “Notes on the Intelligence of Women” (3 pages)
### Week 7  Musical Genius
- Hans Christian Andersen, “The Little Mermaid” (11 pages)
- Ludwig van Beethoven, “Heiligenstadt Testament” (5 pages)
- Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* excerpts (approx. 30 pages)
- Excerpts from Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera* (5 pages)
- H.P. Lovecraft, “The Music of Eric Zann” (8 pages)
- Viewing: Hogarth, *The Distracted Musician*; Vermeer, *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*; images of St. Cecilia
- Viewing and listening: Interviews and performances by David Bowie, Grace Jones, Björk, Beyoncé, Kanye West, etc.
- Genius.com (music/lyrics fan site)

### Week 8  The Artist as Self-Taught Genius
- Yayoi Kusama, excerpts from *Infinity Net* (6 pages)
- William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (roughly 50 plates, available on Blake Archive; select three “songs” from each sequence to examine closely)
- Olivia Laing, “The Realms of the Unreal” (on Henry Darger; 40 pages)
- Roger Cardinal on Outsider Art (pages TBD)
- Terry Castle, “Do I Like It?” (10 pages)
- Selections from *Raw Vision* magazine (in class)
- Lynda Barry, *Making Comics* excerpts and exercises (in class)
- Hilma af Klint paintings and notebook entries (in class)

### Week 9  The Genius in the Gallery/Archive
**Pending arrangement: possible visit to the “Self-Taught Genius Gallery” at the American Folk Art Museum in Long Island City; manuscripts at the Morgan Library or Bobst Special Collections

| Essay #2 draft due |

### Week 10  Neurodiversity and Exceptional Minds
- Keyes, “Flowers for Algernon” (Optional)

### Week 11  Labor and Concealment (Inspiration vs. Perspiration)
- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* (finish: just under 100 pages)
- Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (70 pages, but this is a dramatic text: it’s a bit quicker)
- Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic” (in-class excerpt)
- Thoreau, excerpt from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Optional)

| Final version of Essay #2 due |
### Week 12  Evil Genius/Genius and the Reaches of Morality
- Thomas DeQuincey, “On Murder Considered As One of the Fine Arts” (10 pages)
- Poe, “The Purloined Letter” (20 pages); “The Imp of the Perverse” (6 pages)
- Frances Galton, composite portraits, selections from *Hereditary Genius* (10 pages)
- Some returns to *Faust*

### Week 13  The Genius as Public Intellectual
- Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (First half: approx. 125 pages)
- Excerpts from English, *The Economy of Prestige* (in-class handout)
- MacArthur Fellowship page

### Week 14  Genius in the Age of Innovation and Disruption
- Finish *Dawn* (approx. 100 pages)
- In class: Steve Jobs biopic clips, Apple “genius bar” page
- Discussion: What are our current “genres of genius” (and/or how are they being challenged)? Returns to earlier definitions; brief presentations of final projects.

**Disability Disclosure Statement:** Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Student Accessibility (212-998-4980 or mosecsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**Note on Academic Integrity:** Academic integrity means that the work you submit is original. Obviously, bringing answers into an examination or copying all or part of a paper straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle. But there are other forms of cheating or plagiarizing which are just as serious — for example, presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written); writing a sentence or paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else’s idea(s) without a reference to the source of the idea(s); or submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both instructors have given their permission in advance). Receiving or giving help on a take-home paper, examination, or quiz is also cheating, unless expressly permitted by the instructor (as in collaborative projects).

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**About the instructor:** Amanda Kotch is a Language Lecturer in the Expository Writing Program at NYU. She received her PhD in Nineteenth-Century British Literature from Rutgers University, where she also previously taught. She is interested in the relationship between art, death, curiosity, and writing, with an emphasis on literary biography and site-specific narratives (cemeteries, death houses, libraries, museums, artists’ studios, theaters, etc.) Her writing has appeared in *Studies in English Literature (SEL)*; *Biography*, and *The Morbid Anatomy Online Journal*.