

Course Title

Vulnerability: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Education

Practical Information

Credit points: 5 ECTS

Language of instruction: English

Number of participants: 15

Course length: 3 days

Place: USN Campus Drammen

Dates: May 13-15, 2024

Course Description

This course is anchored in interdisciplinary humanistic research on vulnerability.

Vulnerability studies has become an established field of research that contributes to a better understanding of what vulnerability is, why vulnerability obligates, who has the main responsibility for responding to vulnerability and how best to fulfill our obligations towards the vulnerable. These questions are central to a democratic, inclusive, and sustainable society and education.

The goal of the course is to give participants insight into a variety of theoretical approaches that underline the complexity and ambiguity of vulnerability. We will explore how literature affords important reflections on what it means to be vulnerable and how vulnerability can and should be tackled. We will also discuss how vulnerability is a highly relevant perspective to the educational field. Using examples mainly from Nordic literature in various genres and media, the course aims to give participants insights into the complexity of vulnerability, sharpen their conceptual apparatus and show how vulnerability can be much more than a weakness. In certain situations, vulnerability can act as a resource to make resistance, demand rights, ask critical questions, learn, and deal with change. The course has a general focus on the potential and risks of vulnerability and on the application of the theoretical approaches presented and discussed to the analysis of various kinds of texts. It also provides a platform for participants to discuss and receive feedback on theory-related aspects of their own PhD-projects.

Lecturers

Adriana Margareta Dancus (course leader), Professor of Nordic film and literature at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Dancus has published the monograph *Exposing Vulnerability: Self-Mediation in Scandinavian Films by Women* (Intellect/Chicago University Press 2019) and co-edited *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Arts and Culture* (Palgrave MacMillan/Springer 2020) and *Litteratur og sårbarhet* (Universitetsforlaget 2021)
Lecture: “**The Ethics and Pedagogy of Vulnerability**”. The lecture gives an overview of ethical perspectives on vulnerability, and how these perspectives afford important reflections on learning and teaching.

Ylva Frøjd, Associate Professor of Nordic literature at the University of South-Eastern Norway, is currently working on vulnerability/outsiderness and vulnerability/eco criticism in fiction. Relevant publications: Klimakrisa i klasserommet in *Kontroversielle, emosjonelle og sensitive tema i skolen* (2022), Universitetsforlaget and Sårbarhet in Maja Lundes Bienes historie in *Litteratur og sårbarhet* (2021), Universitetsforlaget.

Lecture: “**Vulnerability and Social Class**”. In recent years, we have seen an increase in economic inequality in Norway, and social inequality and class divisions have returned to the agenda in academia and in the broader public sphere. In this lecture, we will use theoretical perspectives on vulnerability and class to explore how contemporary literature gives important insights into the lower social classes in Norway.

Asbjørn Grønstad, Professor of film at the University of Bergen. Asbjørn Grønstad is a film scholar and professor of Visual Culture in the Department of information science and media studies, University of Bergen. He is the author of several books, some of which are *Film and the Ethical Imagination* (Palgrave, 2016) and *Ways of Seeing in the Neoliberal State* (Palgrave, 2021).

Lecture: “**Vulnerability, Neoliberalism and the Poetics of Precarity**”. Critics have noted how, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the notion of empathy gained traction in public discourse. Advocates of empathy saw the recession as a moment from which genuine social improvements might emerge. The post-recession conversation on empathy gave rise to the idea of “a collaborative and caring world” that would attend to the health and comfort of both people and the environment (Rifkin 2009, 543). However, as Tammy Houser has pointed out, the vision of “global empathy” was tarnished from the beginning through its entwinement with what she terms “the very ethos of neoliberal globalism that it sought to supersede” (Houser 2020, 281). The fate of empathy as a political instrument is revelatory of the subsumptive powers of neoliberalism. In this talk, I will argue that the renewed critical engagement with ethics that marks contemporary theory needs to reckon with the ubiquitous presence of neoliberal politics. Some of the terms readily invoked in the discourses of the ethical turn – for example, care, empathy, and vulnerability – require the context of neoliberalism to be satisfyingly addressed. The reason for this is that as “a normative order of reason” neoliberalism produces ever new forms of vulnerability (Brown 2015, 9). After engaging with some of the current literature on the rise of neoliberalism, I will turn to consider some of the artistic works that constitute what I choose to call a poetics of precarity, Chloé Zhao’s much admired *Nomadland* (2020) key among them.

Maria Karlsson, Assistant Professor at The Department of Literature, Uppsala University, Sweden. Karlsson is part of the ten-year-long interdisciplinary research program Engaging Vulnerability, funded by The Swedish Research Council.

Lecture: “**True Crime on the Air. Vulnerability and Swedish Public Service Radio’s P3 Documentary**”. *P3 Documentary* is by far the biggest success of Swedish Public Service Radio (SR), with more than 500 000 podcast listeners during an average week. The program is mostly concerned with spectacular and violent real crime cases. It has repeatedly been awarded the prize “The popular educator of the year” and is according to SR aimed at listeners “that expect to learn something while being entertained”. The lecture will discuss vulnerability and true crime in *P3 Documentary* with its educational goal in mind.

Annika Bøstein Myhr, Professor of Norwegian and Norwegian Didactics at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Myhr holds a PhD in Comparative Literature and has published extensively on literature about characters living in vulnerable conditions. She is the editor of *Twist: Analyser av aktuell litteratur for barn og unge* (Novus 2021), and co-editor of *Negotiating Identities in Nordic Migrant Narratives: Crossing Borders and Telling Lives* (Palgrave MacMillan/Springer 2022, with Lane and Kjelsvik), and *Sårbarhet og litteratur* (Universitetsforlaget 2021, with Dancus and Linhart).

Lecture: “**Vulnerability and the Role of Empathy in Research**”. This lecture discusses critically the claim of Martha Nussbaum (1997) and others that empathy or compassion is a

positive quality that we can develop through for instance reading literature, and that individuals need to develop for society to be more inclusive and tolerant. The claim seems both sound and fair – but it can also be argued that empathy may in fact work to sustain differences, and to allow the less vulnerable to position themselves as being and doing “good.” Researchers have for this reason claimed that we should divide between ‘passive’ and ‘active empathy’ (Boler, 1997). Others have argued for the development of a ‘critical empathy’ (Leake, 2014), that creates awareness of the structures that make some people particularly vulnerable – and that determine who become givers and receivers of empathy. The lecture describes how the empathy-discussion is relevant for researchers in all stages of research – from the choice of reading materials to the writing and publishing of texts. Are you conducting research on vulnerable individuals or groups? What does that say about you, and about the structures that support your research? Such ethical questions are important to address in a PhD thesis.

Learning outcomes

After completing the course, participants can evaluate the expediency and application of humanistic research to shed light on complex bodily and social phenomena and solve societal challenges related to alienation, discrimination, and injustice. They will be able to handle complex questions and challenge established knowledge about what vulnerability is and existing practices of dealing with vulnerability. They can also plan and carry out research and scholarly development work of a high international standard that takes into account vulnerability perspectives, and can assess the need for, initiate and practice innovation in line with social, political, cultural and environmental changes that impact how vulnerability is experienced and addressed.

Teaching methods

In this course, we use various teaching methods and approaches: lectures followed by plenary discussions, panel discussions, seminars with oral presentations held by the participants in which they situate their own projects in dialog with vulnerability theory, immersive walks, and individual study of a selection of theoretical texts that participants read in advance of the course.

Admission and required prerequisite knowledge

Participants in the course must have an MA-degree. The course is primarily designed for candidates who work with promotion to first competence (PhD and førstelektorprogram). In line with the interdisciplinarity inherent in vulnerabilities studies, we invite participants across the fields of literature, film and media studies, cultural studies, education, philosophy, and history.

Course work requirements

The participants are required to read a selection of theoretical texts prior to the course, participate in all the lectures and engage actively in the plenary discussions of lectures and other participants’ projects.

Assessment

The participants are assessed based on three assignments:

1. Abstract (300 words), in which they explain their own research project and how vulnerability can be a productive theoretical framework for it. The abstract shall be sent to course leader minimum a week before the start date of the course. **Deadline: May 6, 2024.**

2. Oral presentation about theory-related aspects of their own research projects in which they come in dialog with vulnerability theory from the reading list of the course. The presentation will be delivered during the course, in a conventional conference setting (15 minutes presentation, 15 minutes discussion).
3. A cohesive written version of their oral presentation manuscript in which they incorporate feedback received during the course. To be handed in electronically after the end date of the course. **Deadline: May 27, 2024**

The abstract, the oral presentation, and the written text are assessed together as Passed/Not Passed.

Compulsory attendance

80% compulsory attendance

Schedule

May 13, 2024

09:00-09:45 Welcome and Introduction to the Course (Dancus)

09:45-10:00 Break

10:00-10:45 Lecture 1: Adriana Margareta Dancus: The Ethics and Pedagogy of Vulnerability

10:45-11:00 Break

11:00-11:30 Discussion

11:30-12:30 Lunch on campus

12:30-13:30 Presentation and discussion of PhD-projects (2)

13:30-13:45 Break

13:45-14:30 Lecture 2: Maria Karlsson: "True Crime on the Air. Vulnerability and Swedish Public Service Radio's *P3 Documentary*"

14:30-14:45 Break

14:45-15:15 Discussion

15:15-15:30 Break

15:30-16:30 Presentation and discussion of PhD-projects (2)

17:30-19:30 Dinner out of campus

May 14, 2024

09:00-09:45 Lecture 3: Annika B. Myhr: "Vulnerability and the Role of Empathy in Research"

10:00-10:15 Break

10:15-10:45 Discussion

10:45-11:45 Presentation and discussion of PhD-projects (2)

11:45-12:45 Lunch on campus

13:00-13:45 Lecture 4: Asbjørn Grønstad: "Vulnerability, Neoliberalism and the Poetics of Precarity"

13:45-14:00 Break

14:00-14:30 Discussion

14:30-15:30 Presentation and discussion of PhD-projects (2)

May 15, 2024

09:00-10:00 Presentation and discussion of PhD-projects (2)

10:00-10:15 Break

10:15-11:00 Lecture 5: Ylva Frøjd: "Vulnerability and Social Class"

11:00-11:15 Break
11:15-11:45 Discussion
11:45-12:45 Lunch on campus
13:00-14:00 Presentation and discussion of PhD-projects (2)
14:00-14:15 Break
14:14-15:15 Presentation and discussion of PhD-projects (2)
15:15-15:30 Break
15:30-16:00 Concluding remarks and farewell

Reading list for the course

In **bold**, articles that are **obligatory**. In normal font, articles that are recommended.

- Butler, J. (2016). Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance. In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti & L. Sabsay (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (p. 12–27). Duke University Press.**
- Bergenmar, J. (2020). Vulnerability and Disability in Contemporary Nordic Literature: Linn Ullmann's *Grace* and Sofi Oksanen's *Baby Jane*. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 151-171). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boler, M. (1997). The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating multiculturalism's Gaze. *Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 253–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389700490141>.**
- Brown, W. (2019). Introduction. In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (p. 1-22). Columbia University Press.**
- Brown, W. (2019). Chapter 1: Society Must Be Dismantled & Chapter 5: No Future for White Men: Nihilism, Fatalism, and Ressentiment. In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (p. 23-54 & p. 161-188). Columbia University Press.
- Cole, A. (2016). All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique. *Critical Horizons. A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, 17(2), 260–277.**
- Dancus, A. M. (2019). Women, Vulnerability and First-Person Film-making. In *Exposing Vulnerability: Self-Mediation in Scandinavian Films by Women* (p. 1-22). Intellect/The University of Chicago Press.
- Dancus, A. M., Hyvönen, M. & Karlsson, M. (2020). Mobilizing Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 1-15). Palgrave Macmillan.**
- Dodds, S. (2014). Dependence, Care, and Vulnerability. In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (p. 181–203). Oxford University Press.**
- Fineman, M. A. (2013). Equality, Autonomy, and the Vulnerable Subject in Law and Politics. In M. A. Fineman & A. Grear (Eds), *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics* (p. 13–28). Routledge.**
- Ganteau, J.-M & Onega, S. (2017). Introduction. In *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* (p. 1-18). Routledge.**
- Gilson, E. C. (2014). Vulnerability Beyond Opposition. In *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (p. 127-147). Routledge.**
- Grønstad, A. (2020). Conditional Vulnerability in the Films of Ruben Östlund. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.) *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 19-31). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Kittay, E.F. (2019). *Vulnerability and the Moral Nature of Dependency Relations*. In *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. 2nd Edition (p. 57-81). Routledge.
- Koivunen, A., Kyrölä, K. & Ryberg, I. (2018). *Vulnerability as a Political Language*. In A. Koivunen, K. Kyrölä & I Ryberg (Eds.) *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilizing Affect in Feminist Queer and Anti-racist Media Cultures* (p. 1-26). Manchester University Press.
- Kulick, D., & Rydström, J. (2015). *The Roots of Engagement*. In *Loneliness and Its Opposite: Sex, Disability, and the Ethics of Engagement* (p. 39-77). Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.
- Leake, E. (2014). The (Un)Knowable Self and Others: Critical Empathy and Expressivism. In T. Roeder & R. Gatto (Red.), *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom* (p. 166–195). Parlor Press.
- Levinas, E. (1999). *Ethics and the Face*. In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (p. 194-219). Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1989). *Ethics as First Philosophy*. In S. Hand (Ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (p. 75-87). Blackwell.
- Mackenzie, C. (2014). *The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability*. In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (p. 33–59). Oxford University Press.
- Mackenzie, C. (2017). *Vulnerability, Needs, and Moral Obligation*. I C. Straehle (Ed.), *Vulnerability, Autonomy, and Applied Ethics* (p. 83–100). Routledge.
- Mackenzie, C., W. Rogers & S. Dodds (2014). *Introduction: What is Vulnerability and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?*. In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (p. 1–32). Oxford University Press.
- Miller, S.C. (2014). *The Moral Significance of Needs*. In *The Ethics of Need. Agency, Dignity, and Obligation* (p. 15-44). Routledge.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *The Narrative Imagination*. In *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (p. 85–112). Harvard University Press.
- Tønnessen, E.S. (2020). *Life of a Fatso: Young, Fat and Vulnerable in a Scandinavian Society of Perfection*. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 173-194). Palgrave Macmillan.