

PhD Sample Question Paper

Humanities, Social Sciences & Design

All questions are compulsory.

Q 1. Read the following passage carefully and summarize it in simple and correct English. (10 marks)

Open Secrets

There is a famous fourteenth-century Castilian story about a Moorish king duped by three swindlers into believing that a dazzling new suit they are supposedly weaving for him is somehow invisible to any person of illegitimate birth. Embarrassed to admit he cannot see the glamorous fabric, a servant sent to inspect their work reports that good progress is being made. A second servant soon comes back and corroborates this account. The king then goes to see the fabric for himself. Fearing that if he were to admit he cannot actually see anything he might lose his legitimacy and consequently his kingdom, he proceeds to praise the invisible cloth lavishly. This then leads a constable, obviously concerned about his own reputation, also to extol it, which understandably makes the king even more embarrassed that he cannot see it.

When the delusion is further corroborated by yet another sycophant who dares not admit that he cannot really see anything, the king then proudly rides into town to display his imaginary suit, and although it is invisible to all, "everyone thought that his neighbors saw it, and that if they did not, and said so, they would be ruined and disgraced." Only one brave man finally tells the king that "either I am blind or you are naked" and soon "everyone was saying it, until the monarch and everyone else ceased to be afraid of knowing the truth."

This delightful story was famously retold five centuries later by Hans Christian Andersen. Andersen basically kept it intact, making only a few minor changes such as linking the fabric's invisibility to the viewer's stupidity rather than illegitimacy and transforming Western literature's archetypal whistleblower from a self-consciously defiant African into a naive child. Like its original author, Don Juan Manuel, he was particularly fascinated by the fundamental tension it so effectively portrays between the private act of noticing and the public act of acknowledging: "It is magnificent! Beautiful! Excellent!" All of their mouths agreed, though none of their eyes had seen anything." It is this glaring incongruity between interiority and exteriority, perception and expression, that makes "The Emperor's New Clothes" such a captivating story.

The story highlights an intriguing social phenomenon commonly known as a conspiracy of silence, whereby a group of people tacitly agree to outwardly ignore something of which they are all personally aware, such as the sexual liaisons between masters and slaves in the antebellum South or the presence of functionally illiterate student athletes on many educational campuses today. Essentially revolving around common knowledge that is practically never discussed in public, undiscussables and unmentionables that are “generally known but cannot be spoken,” such “open secrets” constitute “uncomfortable truths hidden in plain sight,” to quote Paul Krugman.

Such “silent witnessing” is distinctly characterized by each conspirator’s awareness of the open secret as well as his reluctance to express it publicly. It is this fundamental tension between knowledge and acknowledgement, personal awareness and public discourse, that makes “The Emperor’s New Clothes” such an evocative commentary on social life.

To better understand how one can actually be aware and (at least publicly) unaware of something at the same time it is useful to invoke here the notion of “denial.” Extending this notion beyond the way it was originally conceived by Freud to denote a strictly intrapersonal phenomenon, however, I am specifically interested in the sociology rather than the psychology of denial.

Q 2. The image below is of the famous painting *The Ambassadors*, painted by Hans Holbein the Younger, in Tudor (16th century) England. Critically analyze the image within 500 words. The following questions may help organize your response: What are the structural elements you see in the foreground and background of the image? What can be possible interpretations of the painting, based on your observations and prior reading?

(10 marks)



Q3. Choose any 3 out of the following keywords and concepts listed below and explain these as clearly as you can in 300 words. (15 marks)

1. Allegory
2. Orientalism
3. Hegemony
4. Freewill
5. E.H Carr
6. Discourse
7. Microhistory
8. Anthropocene
9. Gaze and identification
10. Nation and region
11. Populism
12. Liminality

13. Subaltern Studies
14. Epistemology
15. Impressionism
16. User-Interface Design
17. Participatory Design
18. Bauhaus
19. Helvetica
20. Sustainability
21. New Media Art

Q4. Choose any one out of the following questions and write an appropriate response to it within a 1000-word limit: (15 marks)

1. Write an argumentative essay on why resistance and otherness are key concepts for postcolonialism.
2. Is negative liberty—freedom from coercion, interference and restraint—a good thing? Take a position and give good arguments in your essay.
3. Write about a historical journal you follow regularly and briefly comment on a recent article you may have found to be of interest.
4. Fernand Braudel radically changed our way of thinking about historical time. Discuss with reference to his seminal writings on the subject.
5. Political theorist Benedict Anderson proposed in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities* that print capitalism facilitated the emergence of nationalist sentiment. How can we reevaluate Anderson's formulation in the context of print media's decline today?
6. How is the ethnographic method helpful in studying the present? Discuss with reference to a recent book or article you may have read.
7. Discuss postmodernist approaches to history writing.
8. How is our understanding of history shaped by the archives? Discuss with examples from your own research.
9. In what ways has the technological reproduction of art through photography, film, and other media changed the way we perceive and interact with it?
10. What are participatory practices in Design? How do they address the issue of ethics in creative work?
11. How do issues such as the global climate crisis and the growing social and economic inequality engage you as an artist or designer?