The main course in this FIG (English 175) explores how the ways we understand scale and system impact literary, scientific, and philosophical knowledge from the seventeenth century to the present. For example, what are the effects of attending to the small-sized and the outsized? How have investigations into particles, parts, and bodies smaller and larger than the human scale impacted science, aesthetic practice, theology, and politics? How do these investigations remain relevant to us today? In what ways does thinking about the miniscule or the majestically large change the way you engage the world you inhabit?

To address these questions, we will study a number of works from the seventeenth and eighteenth century scientific revolution and enlightenment, a period when technologies like the microscope and the telescope made it more possible than ever before for human beings to investigate organic and inorganic forms that exceeded their powers of perception. Over the course of the term we will also think about how these early investigations of the small, the large, and the composition of systems remains relevant to us in the twenty-first century. We will pursue our investigation across three related units, each of which will move from seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century works to twentieth- and twenty-first century novels, films, and other art works. Our first unit focuses on the small. We are particularly interested in the ways that investigations of the very small impact the way art is produced, conceived, and experienced. Our second unit turns to the related problem of the very large, focusing particularly on how the capacity to perceive and conceptualize the large inflects aesthetics. The final unit of the class opens onto a different vector. Instead of concentrating on scale (on smallness or largeness), we will consider how investigations of scale have given rise to new ways of conceiving systems. To this end, the final unit of this class considers accounts of energy, conduction, and change (what I’m calling hotness and which we will explore through analysis of electricity and thermodynamics) that emerged along with, and followed on, investigations of the small and the gigantic.

Main FIG Class: English 175: "Small, Gigantic, and Hot: Scale and System from the Enlightenment to the Present"

Linking Class: ILS 201: Western Culture: Science, Technology, Philosophy I. Western science and technology in the making. This course examines major developments in Western Culture, viewed in their philosophical and social context, from antiquity to the 17th century.
This FIG is a total of 6 credits. Students will need to take a 12 credit minimum to be a full-time student.