

ENG 419
Fall 14/ Tue+Thurs 10-11.20
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Professor Pyle
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Hours W 10.30-1.30

Contemporary Literary Theory: Four Paradigms

This course in contemporary literary theory is organized according to the four dominant paradigms of critical debate over the past century: language, history, ethics, aesthetics. Each of these “units” offers a concentrated engagement with many of the most influential literary theorists of the 20th and 21st centuries. The goal of the course is to understand the methods of reading and analysis, the assumptions and implications of each of these paradigms of literary and cultural theory. We will, moreover, explore the ways in which these theorists “read” and respond to one another. Through the close examination and discussion of these critics, we can begin to grasp some of the most significant critical movements of the twentieth century: semiotics, Marxism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, post-coloniality. Finally, and most importantly, the course is intended to develop new ways of thinking and writing about literary and cultural texts and to cultivate new modes of reflection not only on *what* texts mean but, just as importantly, on *how* they mean, *how* they work, and *how* they move us. To that end, I have gathered a small and idiosyncratic collection of (mostly brief) texts (stories, poems, songs, videos, films) for us to use as shared points of reference for our inquiries into the adventures of contemporary theory. I know that for some students and scholars “theory” seems forbiddingly abstract, remote from the concrete vitality of literature and culture. At first glance, some of the assigned essays may seem to confirm that assumption; but I hope to demonstrate how valuable “theory” can be for defamiliarizing our received conceptions of literature and culture and producing unexpected and uncharted modes of engagements with the literary and cultural texts that constitute our institutional and personal educations.

Advisory This is not an introductory course in literary criticism, but I do not presume or expect any prior knowledge of or familiarity with these theorists or their philosophical traditions. What I do expect is serious engagement with these critical texts, their arguments, and their implications. Though the amount of assigned reading is not unduly heavy, the essays that I have assigned are often dense and always demanding; and they often make reference to other prominent literary critics and philosophers that we will not have the opportunity to read. As a result, the assigned essays must be read slowly, carefully, and repeatedly.

Please turn off cell phones and other wireless gadgets. Please refrain from chatting with your neighbors during class; and please do not “text” during class.

Requirements Students are expected to complete the assigned readings and to come to class prepared to discuss the material. There are four 2-page close readings of one of the critical essays (40%); and there is a comprehensive final exam (30%). Finally, students will prepare and write a 6-8 page critical project designed to ring a number of these critical perspectives to bear on a literary or cultural text of your choosing (30%). **All students must take the final exam on the assigned date, Tuesday December 9th at 8am.**

There are no books to purchase. All texts will be made available on Blackboard or distributed as photocopies.

“Learning Outcomes” The university administration has assigned professorial faculty with the task of specifying “learning outcomes” for the courses we teach. I refer to my course description for a non-instrumental account of my sense of the “learning outcomes” I would hope to “realize” in this course. Students should learn something significant 1) about an important strain of European and North American intellectual history, 2) about how this strain of criticism teaches us many new perspectives on literature, 3) about addressing literary theory in writing, 4) about “applying” theories to literary and cultural texts, and 5) about how literature and its theorization might interrogate the very notion of “learning outcomes.”

Our Mixed Tape

Samuel Coleridge, “Kubla Khan” (poem)

Joy Division, “Transmission” (video)

John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (poem)

Volkswagen, Nick Drake’s “Pink Moon” (ad)

Lana Del Rey, “Video Games” (video)

Frank O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died” (poem)

Denis Johnson, “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” (story)

Ridley Scott, *Bladerunner* (film)

Weeknd, “Wicked Games” (video)

Emily Dickinson, “This Was a Poet” (poem)

ENG 419: Contemporary Literary Theory

29 Sept: Introductions. de Man, "Return to Philology"

1. Language

2 Oct: Benveniste, "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," "Subjectivity in Language"

7 Oct: Jakobson, "Two Types of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances"

9 Oct: Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" "The Death of the Author"

14 Oct: Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" / de Man & co., discussion on "The Task of the Translator"

16 Oct: de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," "The Resistance to Theory"

first two-page paper due

2. History

21 Oct: Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility"

23 Oct: Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent"

28 Oct: Foucault, "Madness and Society" / Greenblatt, "Circulation of Social Energy"

30 Oct: Barthes, "The Reality Effect" / Jameson, from *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

second two-page paper due

3. Ethics

4 Nov: Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

6 Nov: Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow" / Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?"

11 Nov: Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," "On Commitment"

13 Nov: **Case Study:** Ross, "The Naysayers: Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and the Critique of Pop Culture"

18 Nov: Spivak, "The Politics of Translation" / Zizek, "Courtly Love" and "David Lynch, or, the Feminine Depression"

third two-page paper due

4. Aesthetics

20 Nov: Barthes, "The Rustle of Language," "Leaving the Movie Theatre," "The Third Meaning" / Koestenbaum, "In Defense of Nuance"

25 Nov: **Case Study:** Marcus, "Transmission (2007, 1979, 2010)," de Bolla, "Aesthetic Experience"

critical project due

2 Dec: Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," "The Sacred," "Sacrifice"

4 Dec: Deleuze, "Percept, Affect, and Concept" **fourth two-page paper due**

8 Dec: **Final Exam, 8-10am**