Introduction to Literary and Cultural Criticism

This course is designed to introduce students to some important theories and practices of literary and cultural criticism. My goals for the course are 1) for students to become more self-aware about our experiences and understandings of literature and culture, and 2) for students to develop skills for writing about a wide range of cultural forms. We will read some of the most influential critical and theoretical texts of this century and the last in order to understand how a particular theoretical approach can transform our interpretation and judgment of cultural texts. And we will learn, discuss, and deploy some important critical terms which can help sharpen our insights into cultural forms and their social consequences and personal effects. I will offer a brief “playlist” of sorts: poems, stories, films, TV shows, paintings, videos, advertisements. This playlist will be our “primary” material, the texts we’ll examine from diverse critical and theoretical approaches.

Assignments will be comprised of two sets of two written questions about the readings and their relationship to a text from the “mixtape” (10%), two close reading written assignments (10% and 20%), a mid-term exam (25%), and a final take-home exam project (35%). With the exception of Frankenstein, all texts will be available on Canvas.

Advisory While I think that most of the critical and primary texts are unobjectionable, Children of Men, “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” portray scenes of violence and some foul language. Lee Edelman is a brilliant and influential scholar; but he has a few choice words for the musical Annie.

The Mixed Tape
Joy Division, “Transmission” (video)
John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (poem)
Volkswagen, Nick Drake’s “Pink Moon” (advertisement)
Lana Del Rey, “Video Games” & “Blue Jeans” (video)
Frank O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died” (poem)
Denis Johnson, “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” (story)
Emily Dickinson, “This Was a Poet” (poem)
Alfonso Cuàron, Children of Men (film)
Jordan Schnitzer Museum: “Masterworks on Loan” (paintings)
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (novel)
Schedule of Readings and Assignments

6 Jan: Introductions
8 Jan: Paul de Man, “The Return to Philology”
10 Jan: No Class

13 Jan: Peter de Bolla, “Aesthetic Experience”
15 Jan: Roland Barthes, selections from Camera Lucida
17 Jan: Trip to the Schnitzer

20 Jan: Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday No Class

24 Jan: Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History”

27 Jan: Georges Bataille, “The Sacred”
29 Jan: Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow”
31 Jan: Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

3 Feb: Paul de Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric”
5 Feb: Review and Redemption
7 Feb: Mid-term exam

10 Feb: Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe”
12 Feb: Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion”
14 Feb: Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff”

17 Feb: Slavoj Žižek, “Fantasy as a Political Category”
21 Feb: Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”

24 Feb: Walter Benjamin, “Notes on Epic Theatre”
26 Feb: Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent” & “Structures of Feeling”
28 Feb: Fredric Jameson, from Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

4 Mar: Review and Redemption second written assignment due
6 Mar: Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

9 Mar: Frankenstein (continued)
11 Mar: Frankenstein (continued)
13 Mar: Review and Conclusions

19 Mar: Final Exam Project Due